The Rivers Between Us

by JMoonrise

Summary

They were once two strangers passing each other, but maybe all love needs is a second chance.
Say Goodbye

So you face yesterday
Thinking on the days of old
And the price that we paid
For a love we couldn't hold

I let you slip away
There was nothing I could do
That was so long ago, yeah
Still I often think of you

Say Goodbye, Fleetwood Mac

Then

2009

Rain fell heavily outside, yet the occupants inside the office gathered around the large conference table, hardly noticed. The mood was somber enough and the gloom inside seemed to have a direct effect on the weather outside. The tension in the room was thick as final details were confirmed. Papers would be signed for the final dissolution of a five year marriage.

Agreements were negotiated by third parties as the two represented parties merely stared at one another across the table. Not a single word was exchanged between them during the last few months. They watched and listened as others talked on their behalf. Few words were spoken once a decision was agreed upon three months before, and contact was to be restricted between them.

Distant blue eyes stared almost pleadingly into tired, broken brown eyes. The light disappeared sometime in the last two years and had yet to return. Sometimes he wasn't sure if it had ever been there.

Time had turned them into battle hardened warriors. The life had been stripped away until not much was left of the people they once were. They were mere shadows of the young, fresh faced graduates waiting to set out in the world. The fights stopped and soon enough the bed emptied. Hearts broke as the struggle continued daily. The struggle to talk without arguing, or to listen without objecting and passing blame. The passion remained, but the love was torn away and twisted into something unrecognizable, something ugly and destructive. They were empty shells, and not the people they were supposed to be.

“I need you to sign here Mrs. Fraser.” The woman brushed away a tear as she picked up the pen.

Her hand slowed as it moved towards the paper and she hesitated. Her eyes lifted and caught his. He stared at her and his eyes dropped to her hand. There was sadness, but he didn’t protest as her hand moved in brisk flourishes across the paper.

She pushed the paper away, wanting it as far away as possible from her. It was a representation of the end of ten years of her life with the man across from her. The woman’s head turned away as tears fell freely down her face. She knew it was truly over between them now when he couldn’t
speak the words to stop her from signing.

He didn’t want to make it any more difficult for her, so he quickly added his signature to the documents. It was the last time their names would sit beside each other on documents. “Okay, you are officially divorced. Mrs. Fraser and Mr. Fraser, you are no longer husband and wife.” The pronunciation caused a knot to form in her stomach. They weren’t words she imagined she would ever hear.

Mrs. Fraser stood up and quickly exited the room before Mr. Fraser could approach her. She couldn’t look at him anymore with his puppy dog stare because of his inability to fight for her, for them. She was done. She no longer needed anything he offered. It was better to leave him in the past.

The drive home seemed to take longer than usual, but it allowed her time to think, to reflect. She thought about the day they met, the day they married, and everyday between then and now.

It was as if she were on a tightrope. She kept trying to balance it all. There was school, marriage, family, and work. It was hard and the fragments in her marriage began to show. Each year, the cracks spread farther and farther apart until one day she discovered she slept next to a stranger. It was unbelievable, almost unthinkable. She had known the man for so long, and could barely hold a conversation let alone look at him anymore. All she felt when she stared at him was an overwhelming sadness and guilt.

Her phone dinged as she pulled into her driveway. She debated whether to peek or not. With a deep sigh, she picked up the device and felt her heart break all over again.

JF

Claire, I’ll always be there for ye and the lasses. The end of our marriage changes nothin’.

She didn’t have it in her to respond back to him. So many tears were shed over this man, and she wanted to start anew. A clean break was what the doctor ordered.

Now

CPOV

I entered the house to pure chaos as two girls shouted back and forth. “Gran, where’s my favorite hoodie?” My eldest child’s voice called out impatiently. I was tempted to scold her for her tone.

She and her sister were running around the house in an attempt to gather the belongings they wanted to bring with them for the summer. My mother lived with us to provide assistance with the girls after the divorce.

Bree was digging in the hall closet, while her sister was pounding around somewhere up the stairs. “What’s going on here?” I asked, placing my hands on my hips.

Bree paused and craned her neck. “Oh hello mom, I’m trying to find my riding boots. Daddy got a new horse on the estate.” I ran a hand through her wild, red curls. They normally were much more tame, but it had rained most of the day. “We got home late so we haven’t had much time to finish packing.” Their flight was leaving at ten tonight to make the time transition easier. Jet lag was horrid, especially for children. We purposely scheduled their flights so they could sleep on the
plane and be less likely to sleep after traveling.

“This is why I told both of you to start packing a week ago.” She smiled sheepishly and my heart stopped at the sight. Bree was the spitting image of her father, and sometimes it hurt to have the reminder. It didn’t stop me from loving her, it actually caused me to love her more. “Your boots are in the car from the last time you went riding.” She flushed a light shade of pink before running out the door.

I shook my head in defeat. I could lecture the girls until I was blue in the face to stop procrastinating and they still would. They were this way about everything. It was definitely not something they inherited for me. There was too much of their father in them.

I made my way up the stairs of our Cambridge townhouse to find my mother standing in my daughter’s doorway. She smiled at the sight of her granddaughter attempting to stuff as many things into her suitcase as would fit. Her room was in complete disarray.

“Isla, love, it would be so much easier if you actually folded your clothes before placing them inside.” Isla wasn’t phased at all and continued to search for more items in her room that she could bring with her. The girls acted as if they were packing for a year abroad instead of a couple months.

I rolled my eyes and entered her untidy room. I usually re-packed their suitcases for them as neither was particularly organized. “How was your last day, darling?” Isla attended Newton Country Day School, an all girl’s Catholic school. Bree was at St. Peter School until fifth grade when she would switch over to her sister’s school.

We considered as a family allowing them to attend through eighth grade at St. Peter, but after looking into other schools we found Newton. It was 5-12, which kept the girls at the same school throughout high school. I much preferred this option. Luckily, both schools were each about twenty minutes away from my workplace. I could be there at a moment's notice if something were wrong.

My mother took both girls to school each morning. Bree was dropped off first at her school was the closest to the house. It took sometime for us to fully settle into this particular area of Camden. We used to live far closer to the campus when I was a medical student, but after the divorce, I could no longer stay in our former apartment. There were too many memories. I wanted something that would be mine instead of ours.

My mom came over from England about a year after Jamie moved back to Scotland. She knew how much I struggled with managing two younger children, and one just beginning to start school. She was a true godsend.

“My, do you think you could assist Bree?” She sent me a tender look and chuckled. “I'm afraid her suitcase might look something like this as well.”

My mother Julia Beauchamp was a force to be reckoned with for sure. She raised me and my brother all by herself after my father died in a car accident. She was left with serious injuries herself, yet somehow stayed strong enough for us. She was my hero.

“Of course love, I was already planning on intervening before your arrival. I fear your children are far too much like yourself.” I shot her a dirty look quite offended by her accusations.

I was not nearly as terrible as my children when it came to packing for holiday. They made everything so bloody hard and insisted on several trips to the store; often with remarks such as “I’ve run out” or “it’s eight weeks” or my favorite “they don’t have that in Scotland.” I found it
hard not roll my eyes constantly at their ridiculousness.

“Mom?” I glanced up from my folding to find Isla Faith with a pensive look. “Do you wish that we didn’t have to go?”

I stared uncomprehendingly at my daughter. She was older than her sister and was able to remember the situation far better. “Come here sweetheart,” I patted her bed beckoning her to me.

She cuddled up beside me and I loved it. As she grew older, moments like these were few and far between as she claimed she wanted her independence. Although sometimes I could entice into my bed for a good cuddle session. “I don’t mind you guys going to visit your father. I lost my own when I was five, and I don’t begrudge the time you spend with him.” I stroked her dark red hair. It wasn’t as bright as her father’s or sister’s. “I do get lonely, but then I think about all the time I have with you that he doesn’t. He lives an entire ocean away and relies primarily on FaceTime and phone calls to get him through until your next visit.”

The custody situation was decided on when he chose to move back to Scotland. Both of the girls were born in the United States. While the girls hold citizenship in the U.K., neither of them have lived there for a period longer than two months. They only use their U.S. passports as it is easier for them to leave and re-enter the country.

“Would you ever get back with dad?” From the moment she had a good grasp on the situation between her father and I, it was the question she thought about the most. She actually remembered us being in a relationship as opposed to her sister. She was almost three at the time and showed signs of possessing an eidetic memory. It was fuzzy for her, but she told me she remembered how I kissed her father when he came home from work.

I pressed a kiss to her strawberry scented hair. She smelled like strawberries, outside, and something that was just girlish. “No darling, your father and I don’t fit together anymore. We live here and he lives in Scotland. It’s already hard to manage a long distance relationship, imagine having an intercontinental one. However, we both love you and your sister, and that won’t ever change.” It was perhaps the only thing we agreed on at the end. We wanted to do what was best for our children, and I think ultimately we have. I try to give him as much time with them as I can without compromising their schooling or my plans.

She nodded, seemingly okay with my answer. I knew she would never fully be satisfied with anything I told her. Like any child of divorced parents, her dream was for us to get back together. It was evasive at best, but explaining the situation to an eleven year old was difficult. It was an adult problem, nothing little girls needed to be worried about.

“I’m kind of nervous about going to dad’s.” I hadn’t the slightest idea why. “Now that my body is starting to go through changes, it’s weird. I can’t talk to him about these sorts of things. Like what if I get my period?” Her face was one of horror at the mere thought of starting puberty with only her dad around. I couldn't imagine how Jamie would handle it either.

I knew it was a worry of hers, especially now that she would be twelve soon enough. Several of her friends had already started their cycles, and she was eagerly anticipating and dreading when it would happen to her. She so desperately wanted to be a woman, when I just wanted her to remain a little girl forever. She was growing far too fast for my liking. I don't recall being this way, but I'm sure my mother would contradict me.

I chuckled. “If it does, you can always have your father call your Aunt Jenny. You can also call me at any time. I’m only a phone call away even if you call and wake me in the early hours of the morning.” I smoothed down her wavy hair.
She reddened at the reminder of her first visit with her father. My baby had not quite grasped the concept of time zones, and forced her father to ring me at two a.m. in the morning, east coast time. I couldn’t stay mad though as soon as I heard her voice. She cried a bit because she missed me and home. She was a mere three years old, and didn't quite comprehend why she couldn't see me.

At that point in time, it was only her visiting her father. Bree was still too young as she was still several months away from being two and I couldn't subject my mother to two cranky toddlers. My mother flew with Isla to deliver her to their father. Jenny flew with the girl back and visited for a few days with us. We still talked, but she knew well enough not to mention her brother in my presence. There were topics that we ignored to maintain a balance and to help me keep my stability.

“How was your last day of school?” Isla recently finished sixth grade, and she was such a magnificent student. A change of topic was best to distract her from her favorite topic.

She beamed happily at me. I knew then that I asked the right question. “It was great. Ms. Andrews gave us time to sign yearbooks during homeroom. She signed all of ours. Then during assembly we shared our plans for the summer. I wish I was going to be here so that I could participate in the summer service project.” She was such a generous soul. I knew it came from her father, who was always willing to help out the tenants who rented out land on his estate. He would argue it was a trait inherited from me.

They had such huge hearts and did everything to help those in need. “My big sister gave me a gift. Soon enough, I get to be a big sister.” Big sisters were eighth graders assigned to the students in the 5-7th grades. Each girl received one during orientation. It was good for building relationships between grades and creating a positive school dynamic and tradition.

Isla’s big sisters were regulars at our house. It was usually filled with many of their classmates during the weekend. There was no shortage of noise in our house. The school year was busy, and I relied on my mother and the other parents at school to assist with getting the girls to their activities.

“We had our last mass this morning. It’s going to be weird to attend mass with daddy again. We always go with grandma or you when you are off work. It’s different there though. I’m going to miss choir as well.” She dropped her eyes. "We mostly cried today though. Kara is moving to California. Today was her last, and I won’t be here for her goodbye party.” Her face fell in disappointment and a tear fell down her cheek. I brushed it away with my thumb, wanting nothing more than to hold her.

I was completely gutted by this revelation. It was hard to realize the things my children were deprived of because they had divorced parents living in different parts of the world. Eight weeks of their freedom was spent in the British Isles where aside from family, they didn't know anyone.

“I’m sorry.” It was all I could offer her. Kara had been one of the first friends she made at her new school. They were on the same sports team and hit it off immediately.

She shrugged. “I also have to figure out how to practice for field hockey.” Isla and Bree were quite the athletes. I didn’t have a single athletic bone in my body, but my daughters sure did. They took after their father in that respect. She joined the team this past school year. She also played softball in the spring. Isla started with T-ball at four and continued on from there. She showed such an aptitude and the coaches were impressed with her skills, especially since I knew nothing about the sport.

Bree was a soccer player as the Americans called it. She played all year round. Nothing could distract her when she was in soccer mode. She played club and for her school.
“Maybe your dad will practice with you,” I suggested. I’m sure he could figure it out. He went to a few baseball games, and it wasn't all that different from softball.

We eventually finished packing her suitcase and carry on. There was extra room in case she ended up bringing home more things than she left with. It wouldn’t be the first time. Jamie tended to indulge the girls when they visited. It mostly gave me an excuse to clean out their rooms at the end of summer.

After we were done, we went to check on the progress of her sister. Bree and my mother were just about done themselves. “How about some take out?” I suggested, not in the mood to cook after being called in at four a.m.

I knew with all of the excitement, my mother hadn’t had an opportunity to start on dinner. Both girls cheered excitedly as they did whenever we ate out. It was a rare treat in our house. “Vietnamese,” they agreed upon immediately as they shared a look.

It was our last family dinner for eight weeks. It was one of my favorite nights of the year because it was spent together gathered around the table telling all kinds of stories. Sometimes we shared new ones, and other times we talked about our favorites. It was such a wonderful tradition as I enjoyed time with both of my girls. Their faces lit up and their eyes sparkled as we all talked and laughed.

It amazed me every year how much they had grown. Bree was nine years old heading into the fourth grade. She was becoming more independent with each passing day. Many mornings passed where she no longer wanted me to style her hair for her. She worked on school projects by herself without requiring any assistance and when shopping for clothes she preferred to search without me over her shoulder.

She was so young when Jamie and I first split, and I wasn’t sure how that would affect her in the long run. In retrospect, she probably had the easiest time with it. For her, having divorced parents wasn’t unusual. She essentially never knew any other way to live and it was just life. It wasn’t entirely uncommon amongst her classmates despite it generally being a taboo in Catholicism. Some of her friends from soccer had divorced parents though, and I’d overheard her on a few occasions talk about what a struggle it could be. Her friends leant a sympathetic ear, and they all passed along advice.

“Do you remember the first time Bree and I visited you at the hospital together?” My face flushed with remembered embarrassment.

Bree had been four years old at the time. She knew the general idea of where babies came from, and she interacted with her first pregnant woman. I was coming around the corner at the time when I heard her exclaim, “I see your belly. I know what you did.” The woman she encountered flushed delicately and quickly scurried away in mortification. The nurses who observed the whole ordeal still had a good laugh about it now.

Isla chortled as Bree moaned her mortification. “I was four.” She protested loudly. Laughter surrounded us, and I knew the next few weeks would pass us quickly.

“Remember when we went on holiday in the Caribbean?” I asked Isla. She smiled weakly at me as she attempted to hide behind her hair. “We upgraded our tickets using our mileage points. So we were going to be in first class, we boarded first, and then as the people in business and coach boarded, Isla yells ‘first class, you’re second class.'”

Isla covered her red face as Bree giggles herself silly. “That’s so funny. You were a snob.” The
two of them trade barbs back and forth in a sibling manner. I knew it was how they expressed their love for one another. It only bothered me when there were slamming doors and yelling/shoving involved.

The girls cleared up the dinner mess and soon enough the car was loaded up with their suitcases. While the girls aren’t departing until ten, they have to go through TSA. I also have to check them in and wait for someone to escort them because of their age. Minors weren't allowed unaccompanied on flights.

I parked my SUV in short-term parking as I helped them unload their massive suitcases. We checked their bags and print out their tickets. I waited with them for the flight attendant to arrive to take them through security.

I forced back tears as I hug and kiss them for the last time for eight weeks. It’s always the hardest part of when they leave. I watch them as they disappear into the fold. It took a while for their red heads to become just another person in the crowd.

Now I just needed to keep myself busy until they returned to me.
Isla and Bree have made it to Scotland. How do the changes in his daughters make Jamie feel?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*I'm so sorry
I couldn't give you the perfect story
A textbook happy ending
Where nobody here gets hurt
But don't you worry
Your daddy and your mommy
May be a little broken
But not our love for you

-Perfect Story, Idina Menzel

J POV

The airport was busier than usual as people bustled around me. There were tearful reunions, stiff pleasantries exchanged, and some people were simply there by themselves.

My favorite time of year had rolled by once again, and I was prepared for another summer with my daughters.

The lasses were growing up, and I struggled sometimes with the distance between us. Often we connected through video chatting where they regaled me with tales about school and sports. They frequently left out mentions of their mother, and sometimes it hurt more than I could express.

I didn’t want them to feel as if they had to monitor and edit their stories to prevent me from hurting. It was difficult to share those sorts of feelings with children as I knew they merely wanted to protect me. They were precocious. I wasn't bothered by their modifications, but it always made me wonder what they left out.

I watched through narrowed eyes as another group of people descended down the escalator. I recognized my two red heads in the fold, and waited patiently as the airline representative escorted them to me. I quickly signed documents for them to be released into my custody and exchanged my thanks.

“Hi daddy,” Bree exclaimed happily. The first thing I noticed about her was her longer locks. They hung in huge ringlets down her back. She had also grown quite a few inches since the previous summer, almost nearly the height of her sister. I was surprised by how much had changed in what seemed such a short amount of time. She threw her long arms around me and squeezed tightly. I
held her to me before grabbing her sister and enfolding her into this family hug. I last saw them at Hogmanay when they spent a week with me. It was a last minute trip, but Claire had a conference in California. She thought I would appreciate the unexpected time with the girls and arranged the surprise with Jenny.

Isla was a bit more embarrassed by my antics than her sister. *When did that happen?* She slid out of my grasp and smoothed down her hair with flushed cheeks. I struggled to compose myself because I wasn’t prepared for her to exhibit this sort of behavior so soon.

As much as Bree had changed, there was a bigger change in her older sister. Isla was well on her way to being a lovely lass. She wasn’t my wee bairn anymore, and I wasn’t sure I was okay with that. I remember holding her in my arms the moment she was cleared by the doctors, and thinking I was the luckiest man in the world. “Look at ye, ye’ve grown so much.” She was nearly as tall as her mother after spending much of her childhood significantly shorter than her cousins and her peers. Claire said it was because of her being born prematurely.

“Our flight was good,” she shifted uncomfortably under my gaze. Her attention was redirected to the luggage and she pointed out their bags to me. I lifted them with ease off the conveyor belt, and was about to roll them when they resisted. “We are independent women daddy. Mom says it’s important if you can do things for yourself.” Somehow I could hear more to that statement than what was said.

It sounded like something Claire would say. She wasn’t one to generally allow me to do things for her as she despised being considered helpless or incapable. “How was your flight?” I shifted the topic to something easy. It was always hard transitioning into our relationship.

“It was good. The movie selection was okay, but that’s why mom let us bring our tablets. She let us each buy three new movies for the trip. It was a long one though. We didn’t have time to nap before we left home yesterday. We kinda had some last minute packing to complete.” She ducked her head to hide the blush adorning her face. I was amused because it was definitely a trait they inherited from me. I was a notorious procrastinator.

I noticed both girls were dead on their feet and were dragging as we made our way to the car park. While they were excited to see me again, they had had a layover in London that got delayed for an hour. It was already a long journey from the States, and I figured it was best to get them home to get a nap.

I purchased the house not long after I returned back to Scotland. While Jenny offered me Lallybroch, I didn’t feel comfortable taking it from her. She and Ian were raising their family and I only had a part time one. It seemed unfair for them to have to relocate if I only had the girls with me in the summer. The house and estate was meant for a family.

I found a place in Edinburgh. It was a detached family home, and while the girls wouldn’t necessarily be with me all the time, they needed somewhere to come home to when they visited instead of a flat. The garden was big enough for a playhouse and a trampoline. The girls planted flowers a few years before that I tried to keep up with when they were gone.

The sitting room was surprisingly spacious, and the girls never complained otherwise. They spent the majority of the time in front of the telly or in their rooms. I knew they lived in a townhouse with their mother, so it was quite a bit different. Their neighbours were fairly close. I never asked for full specifics, but occasionally I caught glimpses when they were moving amongst the rooms in the house. It was hard enough realizing that my daughters were growing up city children, but
they were also Americans.

They hadn’t picked up their mother or grandmother’s accents. It wasn’t an issue, but it created a sort of distance. There were aspects of their lives I couldn’t relate to. I hadn’t been stateside in years, and I wasn’t as caught up on events as I should’ve been. I knew it was strange for them to come to Scotland as people stared at them strangely when they spoke. I noticed the questioning glances people gave me as soon as the American accents were detected. It wasn’t for them to pry, and the only ones who truly knew the situation were family, friends, and coworkers.

As soon as we were in the car, they were fast asleep. The long night seemed to have caught with them, and neither were resistant to the soothing vibrations of a car in motion. I couldn’t help but think it made them appear younger. Their heads lolled against the windows, and sweet Bree slept with her mouth open. I figured now was as good of time to make the call.

I dialed the familiar number into my mobile and waited as it rang. The phone clicked, and I was rewarded with a breathy “hello” on my speaker.

“Good afternoon Claire, the girls have arrived safely.” I informed her. It was a courtesy call we extended to one another.

There was a hesitation on her end, and I would’ve thought she had hung up if I hadn’t heard her breathing. “Thank you for calling me.” I caught the tears in her voice, but didn’t comment knowing it would make the call more tense and awkward. We didn’t talk about certain things anymore. “I’m sorry. I’m being silly. You would think after all these years I would be okay with this.” I pictured her watery, whiskey colored eyes and her long fingers gently brushing away stray tears as she tried to choke back sobs. “Can you tell them to call me? I’m sure they’ve long entered the world of dreams.”

“Yes, I can do that for ye. Is there a particular time ye want them to ring?” I knew she worked crazy hours, and it wasn’t always easy to get in touch with her.

She sighed on the other end of the line. “Well I’ve actually just been called in, but I will have my phone with me in surgery. I really have to go Jamie. Goodbye.” She ended the call before I had the opportunity to return the sentiment. It was typical of our exchanges.

Our shared conversations over the years were stilted and revolved around our daughters. It was the only safe topic we generally agreed upon. I knew there were areas of her life I no longer had access to, and I tried not to push too much. It was better to have a little bit of her than nothing at all.

She tried to provide me as many chances to take part in my daughters’ lives despite a distance of some three thousand miles. I was allowed to partake in the conversation of selecting schools for them when it came time for enrollment in kindergarten. I assisted in providing the tuition payments, despite Claire telling me it wasn’t necessary.

I sent monthly child support payments, but she informed she set aside the money to pay for the girls to go to university in the future. It stung that I wasn’t able to directly provide for my children. My father had raised me to have honor and responsibility, and my children were my responsibility. It was my duty to provide for them. Claire, however was a stubborn woman. I know she wasn’t doing it to hurt me, but to show me that she was able to take care of the girls.

At least during the summer, I had time to shower them with attention and gifts. I never went
overboard as most of their things had to stay in Scotland. While they certainly carried treasures back, there just wasn’t enough room to bring everything.

We arrived home a little after half past two. My weary travelers were barely conscious.

Bree looked around with sleep in her eyes as she unbuckled her seatbelt. She leaned into the car as I unloaded the bags, while Isla rested against her sister. While I could see all the changes in them and how they had grown up, it was nice to have this reminder that they were still little girls.

“Alright, girls I will bring your bags in. Why don’t you go rest?” Neither responded to me, they used each as a support to walk up the drive. Isla used her key to unlock the door and they disappeared.

I had to wonder why neither lass slept on the plane. Both girls slept for a few hours, and I made some calls. I checked in with my employees at the brewery and the pub, and then called Jenny and Ian about the arrangements for the weekend.

Eight weeks always went by far too quickly. I wasn’t a planner in the extreme sense though as sometimes life was unpredictable. Some days the lasses and I went out and allowed the adventures to find us.

“Daddy?” Bree called as she came down the stairs. Her hair was all mussed and she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. It reminded me of when was a bairn. She was such a wee thing with her gingery curls and big blue eyes. Despite what Claire said, I always saw more of their mother in them than myself.

I patted the sofa and she snuggled into my side. “What is it Bree?” I pressed my lips to her hair and inhaled her lavender scent.

“I missed you. I know we talk on FaceTime all the time, but it’s not the same as when we hug. You can’t help me with my homework. Next year I’m starting French, and while mommy is good at it, you’re better.” I grinned at her candor. While many would say she was so much like me, it was moments such as this when I saw Claire in her. Bree wasn’t someone who edged around the truth. She told people how she felt.

I sighed and pulled her onto my lap. It was hard to believe she turned nine and would be ten later this year. When Claire and I divorced, she was nothing more than a wee babe. She had only managed to say a few words: La (Isla), ma, da, and some others mixed in. It was nothing concrete as she wasn’t even a year yet.

Here she was now, nearly ten years old and I was missing all of it. I had know idea what a gulf our divorce caused. It was as if this were my side of the world and that was hers. I hadn’t been back stateside and she hadn’t been across the pond. “Ye ken Bree, I understand what you are going through. I feel that same.” She laid her head against my chest. She was still tiny despite her growth. “The fact is that you live with mommy. She would be awful sad if you stayed forever.” I wouldn’t mind it, but Claire didn’t have much as far as family went.

She had her mother, her brother, and the girls. “Did you know that I got a new cousin daddy?” Her voice took on a different tone. “His name is Charlie. He’s really little.” She showed me with her hands and I smirked.

“Ye ken you were that little once too?” She pulled her back her head, her curls whipping me in the face.

Her head began to shake in disagreement. “I don’t think so.”
I kissed her forehead and let her go on believing what she wanted. Children would believe what they wanted anyways regardless of what adults said on the matter.

“Can we order pizza for dinner?”

“Sure, why not.” I told her. I knew they didn’t eat out much as Claire preferred home cooked meals with the occasional take out. “What kind of pizza do ye want?”

About half an hour later, Isla finally made an appearance as the pizza guy pulled away. “You know I think you’re just trying to bribe her.” She said with a teasing grin.

“Well I have to figure out how to win points. So tell me about school?” I knew they attended different ones, but in another year, Bree would be transferring to her sister’s school.

They entertained him with tales from the last six months. “During Easter mass, this boy yells out ‘wait! Mom! Jesus died?’ Everyone laughed including our priest. Then our priests tells the boy to tell his mom that it’s okay to come to church every week, not just on Christmas and Easter.” Both girls giggled madly as Isla told me the story.

“Do ye go to church every week?”

They nodded. “Mommy usually goes with us, but sometimes she gets scheduled or called in. We also have mass every Friday at school.”

“So what are our plans for the summer daddy?” Bree asked in what she probably considered a conversational tone. I knew better after knowing her mother for so long.

My lips twitched as I watched her attempt to be nonchalant and Isla slid in her chair. “Well I figured, we could make a visit to Lallybroch. You’re Aunt Jenny has missed you guys. The rest we can take as we go along.”

They nodded their heads in unison. “Do you think we could do some service work?” Isla questioned me.

I crinkled my brow in confusion. “Service?”

She rolled her eyes in a similar manner to her mother. I didn’t need three guesses to figure out where she learned that skill from. “Yes, you know like doing good deeds for others. Every summer girls at my school complete service projects. Since I’m not there, I thought I could do something here.”

I understood what she meant. I was merely confused about the context of her question. “I suppose we could. I can look into some things for us.”

I took a sip of my water just as the words “so dad, are you going to get back with mom?” left my eleven year old daughter’s lips.

Chapter End Notes

I’m not planning to post daily, but the words did seem to flow quite nicely today.
Can't Help Falling In Love

Chapter Summary

Claire dreams about the first time she met Jamie.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Wise men say only fools rush in
But I can't help falling in love with you
Shall I stay?
Would it be a sin
If I can't help falling in love with you?

Can't Help Falling In Love, Elvis

CPOV

I sat in my office reviewing charts and filling out paperwork. My residents made a few errors in their charts, and now I was responsible for fixing them before my departmental chief noticed.

Each class struggled in the first year, and it was a bit hard to transition them from being students to being surgeons. Whilst they were still learners, they had to step up. As a professional, there wasn’t always going to be someone there to cover up their mistakes.

I sighed as the words began to blur together on the paper. The girls had already been gone two days and I was more than exhausted.

My shifts were longer as I volunteered for the graveyards.

I leaned back in my chair and sank into the coziness. The bones in body cracked as I stretched my tight limbs. A groan fell from my lips. I needed a massage. My eyes slipped shut as my body relaxed from the stress of the last few days.

2000

I took my seat on the train. I lucked out and managed to grab one by the window. It was fuller than usual, but it was the end of the weekend and people were heading back to London.

I rested my head against the window as I waited for the train to depart. I crossed my fingers, hoping no one would sit across or next to me.

My eyes fluttered drowsily as I attempted to fight off sleep.
“Do ye mind if I sit here?” My eyes popped open to a boy who appeared about my age.

My brows furrowed. “Uh sure…” I gestured to the available space around me. I sat up and adjusted my position.

I tried not to stare at him, but I couldn’t help but glance at him. I caught his eyes on more than one occasion. My skin warmed under his heated gaze. I felt an undeniable attraction to him, which was unusual for me.

“I’m Jamie,” he introduced himself with a shy smile. His eyes crinkled at the corners, and his blues seemed brighter.

I felt my lips curling up. “My name is Claire.” I held my hand out for him to shake, which he seemed to do with some amusement. As our skin touched, it was like electricity went through me. His touched lingered on my skin as he removed his hand from mine.

Suddenly, I was bereft. A coldness embraced me and I wanted the warmth of his touch. I was shocked at my thoughts because he was a perfect stranger. “Are ye from England?” He asked me.

“Yes, I was born and raised in London. Where are you from?” I leaned forward in my seat before I realized what I was doing. My face flushed at how obvious I was being. I wasn’t one of those girls.

He didn’t seem to mind. “I’m from just outside of Inverness. I was home visiting family. I actually attend school in London.” He was such an open person, and unlike most of the people I associated with.

“How old are you?” It wouldn’t be an issue if he were a university student, but I would be more embarrassed.

“I recently turned sixteen. What about you?”

I was in a reciprocating mood. “I’m sixteen too.” Somehow I managed to talk to him for entire train ride back to London.

I had never connected with someone so quickly before, but I wanted to know him. The more he gave me, the more I wanted to share with him. “Well my stop is the next one, but here’s my number. Feel free to ring if you want.” I smiled at him as I got up. The train jerked to a stop and I fell directly into his lap.

I moaned in mortification and attempted to push myself off his lap. His arms tightened around me, “I got ye. Sassenach.” His whisper was like a caress on my skin. His voice was low and seductive. I squeaked in response. To make matters worse, I sniffed him. It wasn’t discreet either. He smelled amazing; it was something woody and possibly sandalwood.

I scurried off the train with nothing more than one last parting glance to escape the situation. I couldn’t believe such a thing happened to me. I knew he was never going to call now after that humiliating display. I resigned myself to the inevitable. He probably believed I was a total trollop with the way my body responded to his touch.

My mum was there with a motherly smile and a warm hug. Despite being sixteen years old and only gone for a weekend, I missed her dearly. She wrapped her arm around my shoulders and we walked back to our flat.

“What’s wrong love?” Julia always seemed to know when I needed her. She picked up on my
moods and helped me fix whatever required fixing. “You look down.”

Before the words could come, the tears fell first. My mother was completely shocked by my behavior as I was much more composed than this. “Something occurred on the train, and now I’m humiliated.” I know my mother probably wanted to have a laugh at my expense, but she kept herself fairly controlled in order to best help me.

Her arm wrapped around my shoulder and she gave me a good squeeze. “Oh darling, I promise you’ll love through this. Why don’t you tell your old mum exactly what happened? It’s entirely plausible that you’re over exaggerating and perhaps a bit tired.”

As we made our way home, I told her all about the boy I met on the train and the many ways in which I humiliated myself. I honestly could die just thinking about it.

“I don’t think there’s any need for that. I know it seems as if it’s the end of the world, but Claire you’re such a resilient young woman. From what you tell me about how he reacted, I don’t think he had any issues.”

I swiftly covered my face with my hands as I changed colors. My mother found ways to continuously surprise me, and this was just another opportunity for her to do so. “Never say anything relating to sex in my presence again. Aren’t you celibate?” I definitely didn’t want to think about my mother having sexual relations.

The flat was quiet, meaning my brother was most likely out. The two of us sat around the table drinking tea. It soothed me and I calmed down enough to evaluate the situation rationally. “You know you’re right mum. He probably won’t even remember this come tomorrow. He’s probably accustomed to females hanging all over him. “ I grumbled unhappily.

There was something in her smile I couldn’t quite read, but it was almost knowing.

The phone rang and my mum left to answer it. “Beauchamp residence?” I rolled my eyes because it was unlikely it was someone we didn’t know. We had an unlisted number. “You’re calling for Claire? Hang on a moment.” She covered the receiver. “Claire, it’s for you. It’s Jamie.”

I jumped up so fast that I knocked my chair over. I snatched the phone and was in my bedroom before my mother could make any teasing remarks. “Jamie?”

“Hello Sassenach,” he greeted.

I couldn’t believe it. “You actually called.” I sounded incredulous, but I really wasn’t sure what to think with the way we ended things on the train.

“I gave ye my word, didn’t I? I’m not someone who easily breaks promises Claire.” My name sounded different on his lips. It was said with reverence as if it were the most important word he knew. “So what are ye doing?”

We spent two hours on the phone that first night. My brother pestered me for the rest of the evening. “Stop being such a knob head.” I flicked his head and he shoved me in return.

“Oh piss off,” he muttered. “You really shouldn’t get too invested. He’s probably a dog with two dicks, and you’ll just be the next notch on his bed post.” As soon as he said it, I could see the remorse in his eyes. “Claire, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

I nodded, but I wasn’t quite ready to forgive him. “Good night Tom, we’ll talk about it tomorrow.”
His face fell in disappointment. We rarely argued, but sometimes he took things too far. “Night Claire, I just want you to know, I’m just scared one day you won’t be here.”

He didn’t mean it in the morbid context. Tom was younger than me by a year, and he knew my aspirations to attend medical school in the future. I hadn’t dated anyone so he didn’t have to compete for my attention. He was like every other little brother. “Yeah,” I said as I brushed him off and went to my room.

I wasn’t actually mad at my brother, but I was hurt. He didn’t seem to trust me to pick out a decent guy. Jamie wasn’t like the pricks I went to school with. He listened when I talked and shared a lot about himself.

There was such an intimacy shared between us, I hadn’t expected. He was gentle despite his rugged exterior.

As I laid in bed, I thought about him. He had lovely ginger curls. His were much nicer than mine, which were quite frizzy. My mother wouldn’t let me do anything to tame them. He was much taller than my 5’4” frame, at least a foot. His sinewy muscles helped contribute to his hotness. He was a beautiful specimen. It was hard for me not to stare when he was seated in front me.

Much of the attraction also came from his accent. I didn’t actually know many Scots, but I loved when he spoke Gaelic. Of course, I didn’t understand any of it, but it was fascinating nonetheless. I know he came from the Highlands. He was outdoorsy and loved horses. He was a lover of the city, but could appreciate certain aspects. He was unlike anyone in my world.

I couldn’t wait until our next phone call.

Chapter End Notes

I’m sure those of you who have singings know how it goes. Please, don't expect an everyday posting. The story just keeps haunting me at night.
I held back a smile as the girls eagerly bounced in their seats. The week passed as we caught up on events and spent some time around the city.

I took the girls to the beach where they screeched about the coldness of the water. It didn’t stop them from actually playing in it. Their laughter still echoes in my ears, and I think the moment will be imprinted in my memory forever.

They were more accustomed to warmer waters. Neither was used to living so far north, and they usually went on holiday with their mother after their time here. “So tell me about the trip you are taking this year?” I was genuinely curious as to what they did with their mother.

“Well mommy said we are going to Martha’s Vineyard. She’s stay at her friend’s house for a week.” They weren’t leaving Massachusetts. “We went last year too. It was fun. We went shopping and ate at really nice restaurants. The beaches are pretty nice. The house sits on a bluff that overlooks the ocean. It’s beautiful.” Isla’s voice took on a dreamy sort of tone. Bree eagerly shook her head in agreement.

“How often do ye go on holiday?” As I said, they doctored some of their stories to prevent me from feeling bad.

Isla and Bree exchanged looks as if debating whether or not tell me. It was apparent what the answer to my question was. “Well, we often take mini trips for our birthday. It can be the weekend before or after, sometimes it falls on our actual birthday. Mommy lets us pick the destination and she makes all the arrangements.” Bree informed me as she shot her sister a worried glance.

I hummed nonchalantly. I didn’t know Claire did anything special for the girls’ birthdays. I was under the impression they were home. “I see.” I murmured more for the girls’ benefit than my own.

“Are you okay daddy?” I heard the concern in Isla’s voice. I grunted unintelligibly. “I guess we didn’t tell you because you aren’t there with us. We thought it might hurt your feelings.”
It wounded more knowing my daughters believed they had to protect me from their life. “I am not offended love.” I peeked at her to find her eyes full of skepticism. “Honest I am not. I ken, you and yer mam have your own traditions. I wish you wouldn’t omit details. It’s disrespectful to Claire, your mother.” I amended, making it clear who I was talking about.

Both girls wore remorseful expressions. I knew they hadn’t considered their mother’s feelings if she knew they felt the need to hide details. “We’re sorry. If you want we can tell you about some of the places we’ve been.”

The remainder of the drive was spent with them sharing stories about their travels. For spring break, Claire had taken the girls to California. They spent the week at the beach, Disneyland, shopping, and bonding. I had never spent spring break with them as it was such a short amount of time.

“You know you could always visit us.” Isla hinted not so subtly.

I knew what she wanted, but I managed to deftly avoid answering her question. It wasn’t as if I didn’t have response prepared. I wished I could resolve the issues between Claire and myself, but there was an ocean literally and figuratively between us.

She made it clear how she felt about me.

July 2009

“If you’re going to leave then just do it.” Her voice was cold, devoid of any emotion. Her face was expressionless.

From the moment I met her, I could read almost any emotion that flashed across her face. The last few weeks, or I should say months, she closed herself off to me. I didn’t blame her as it was my fault entirely.

My eyes held my own shock at her statement.

I knew she received no pleasure from delivering the final blow to our marriage. She was a woman suffering. “Can we talk about it?” I don’t know if I was prepared to give up on what we built together.

She turned away with her shoulders up to her ears. Her arms wrapped tightly around her. “I hate you.” She meant it. “I don’t know when it started, but damnit I hate you. It’s your fault all this happened and I can’t find it in myself to forgive you.”

I hadn’t forgiven myself. How could I expect her to do the same. I touched her shoulder and she flinched away from my hand. Stung, I backed away from her. Never before had she rejected affection from me.

“Claire,” I pleaded softly. My eyes filled with moisture as I realized what was happening.

“I want a divorce.” She turned around and her own eyes burned with tears. “I can’t see your face without hating you. I don’t want to feel this way. For so many years all I did was love you, but now I can’t. I’ve been trying so hard to make our marriage work, but the damage has been done.” Her knees collapsed and luckily she fell onto the sofa.

Her small body crumbled in on itself as she shook with sobs. It was my fault.

It was far from our last conversation. It was just the one that defined our relationship from then on. She no longer wished to be my wife. I pledged to make her happy when we married, and I was
fulfilling my end of my duty. I was giving her what she wanted.

We pulled into the courtyard of the estate. The girls were out of the car before I could put it in park.

Maggie, Kitty, and Janet were out the door the moment they heard the car pull in. I had no doubt they were waiting for our arrival. Maggie was almost sixteen years old, but she doted on her younger cousins. She was fascinated by anything related to America. The girls were quite the novelty here in the Highlands.

Kitty was fourteen and quite the smartass. She knew how to drive anyone mad with her quick wit. The youngest was Janet, although she preferred Janie. She was eleven years old. Her nature was gentle and motherly. She spent much of her time in the garden or taking care of the animals. I had a fondness for her as she reminded me occasionally of my Bree.

They didn’t favor one another in looks as Janet had brown hair and brown eyes. None of Jenny’s kids looked like mine. Although, when they were younger, Ian and Bree looked a bit alike. He was significantly younger than my girls with his seventh birthday in a few months. As of last summer, Bree no longer had the patience to entertain her younger cousin. She called him a baby, although I’m not sure where she received the impression that she was much older.

Michael used to spend much of his time trailing behind Isla and his twin Janet. Then he decided girls were gross and fled from them when the opportunity presented itself.

My namesake was headed off to university in the fall. He had chosen somewhere in the States, surprising not only myself but his parents.

I sometimes envied Jenny having so many children. When one left, she still had a bunch of others to mother and nurture. I still remember the conversation we had when I told her about the divorce. She was none too pleased with me.

September 2009

“Jamie, you’re a fool if you do this.” She warned me over the phone. She wanted to come over to knock some sense into my skull. “I canna believe ye would truly leave your wife.” Jenny was far more religious than most people knew. “After everything this year, yer going to let this break you apart?”

I buried my face in my hands. “She hates me.” I cried.

I could feel her softening over the phone. Jenny had been my rock since our mother passed. “She’s suffering.” I knew Jenny was relating to Claire. “At the moment, yer the one in front of her. She needs someone to blame and it’s you. I don’t think she hates you.”

I had to disagree with her. The fury barely held back in her eyes clued me into her feelings. She never displayed such hatred before. “Ye have no’ seen her since May. She’s different around me. It’s awkward.” I ran my fingers through my hair. “I canna talk to her without blundering around. Everything I do upsets her. If I can give her this one thing, I am still keeping to my vows.”

“Jamie,” she sighed with pity. “I canna tell ye what to do. It is your decision. However, I will warn ye, it will be its own burden. You will regret it. Divorce is not something to take lightly. What about the church?”

“Well we’ve already began the paperwork for a church annulment. I haven’t seen her smile in months, at least not around me. She gives me scathing remarks and icy glares. We haven’t slept in the same bed in ages, and then I moved out of the apartment two weeks ago. I feel like I can
Jenny was silent on the other end. I knew she was thinking. She was the biggest champion of our relationship, taking an instant liking to Claire. It actually perturbed me in the beginning because Jenny was your typical rough and tumble kind of girl. She didn’t have lofty aspirations. She had a college degree of course, but she was perfectly fine being a stay at home mother.

**Her and Claire bonded when I brought her home for the first time. Neither of them would tell me what happened during the visit. All I knew was that they spoke to one another on a regular basis.**

“Did she not tell you about it?” I wouldn’t be surprised if she hadn’t.

“No, but I think she expected you to tell me.” She blew out a long breath. “If you think this is the best decision for yer marriage, well go ahead with it. Claire will still be my sister.” I knew she was essentially saying she wouldn’t cut off contact with her despite the state of my relationship with her.

“Fair enough.” We never spoke about the divorce again.

**She picked me up from the airport and commented on my weight.**

Jenny walked out with a wide smile. “How are ye?” Her eyes sparkled with happiness. She enjoyed spending time with her nieces.

“Tired, the girls don’t nap anymore.” She chuckled at my expression. “They’ve grown up so much since January.”

She nodded knowingly. “It is the way of children. Don’t borrow trouble though, they are still young yet.” She guided me into the house where Ian laid on the couch with his video games.

“Ian! Say hi to your uncle.” She commanded in a tone reminiscent of our mother.

The boy barely lifted his eyes from his game. “Hi Uncle Jamie,” he said before redirecting his attention back to his game.

His mother shook her head. “I tell ye, he never wants to do anything.”

“The girls are like that about their iPads. They spend a lot of time on them.” I wasn’t sure what they actually did either. Isla tried to explain to me once, but it mostly went over my head.

We sat around the kitchen table drinking tea. “Ian’s with Jamie shopping for school things.” Her eyes held barely contained sadness. “I canna believe he is leaving.”

“Well at least he won’t be completely alone. Claire lives over there, and if need be can fly out to him.”

Jenny bit her lip but agreed. “Yes, although I’m not sure he remembers what she looks like. It has been sometime since they’ve seen her.” To be honest, Jamie probably was in the best position to remember Claire. He was nine when we divorced. “Do ye ken how she is?”

I quirked a brow. “I figure ye probably ken better than me.”

She was bemused. “She’s fine. I talked to her a few days ago. She’s a bit lonely with the girls here, but her job keeps her busy.” Her eyes held a secret though. I was about to ask what she was keeping from me when the kitchen door burst open with a distraught Bree and Kitty.
I feel like my life is flashing by
And all I can do is watch and cry
I miss the air, I miss my friends
I miss my mother, I miss it when
Life was a party to be thrown
But that was a million years ago
A million years ago

Chapter End Notes

The story will get a bit angsty at times. There will be some emotional chapters later on, but I'll warn you about tissues before hand. Thanks again to everyone who is reading.


The Story

Chapter Summary

Claire enjoys an evening out before a family emergency rearranges all of her upcoming plans.

Chapter Notes

It is a Jamie/Claire fic, but I am introducing a new character. I promise everything will work out in the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All of these lines across my face
Tell you the story of who I am
So many stories of where I've been
And how I got to where I am
But these stories don't mean anything
When you've got no one to tell them to
It's true, I was made for you

CPOV

I was a mother. It was perhaps the first word I would use to describe myself. Everything in my life came secondary to that role. After, I would say doctor, sister, and daughter. Wife was one I gave up.

Now I wasn’t a nun and my whole life didn’t revolve around the girls. In the beginning, I tried, but my mother encouraged me to expand my interests. She didn't want me to spend the rest of my life alone, especially because the girls wouldn't always be young. Eventually, they would grow up and leave.

I knew she was hinting at something else. It was different for her as she was a widow, not to say she remained single often. Somehow she attracted quite a few men including some younger ones, and I never asked about it. I was positive I didn't want to know the answer. She wanted me to get out there and have fun. I didn’t immediately date, or appear open to the idea of searching for someone. I preferred my solitude, although my friends managed to get me out on a few occasions. When wine was introduced to my system, I became a weepy, emotional mess and they comforted me.

It was complete accident actually when I did meet someone. Peter spilled his coffee all over me at the hospital. He was an anesthesiologist I had worked with on a few occasions, but I hadn't an opportunity to get to know him. We didn’t regularly cross paths.

He was engrossed in some files and slammed right into me. Luckily, his coffee was more of the lukewarm variety by then, or else I might not have been as forgiving of the incident. He offered to
pay for my dry cleaning, and then he was asking to take me on a date. I had no idea what made me say yes. It could’ve been the excitement someone was actually interested in me after such a longtime, or temporary insanity. I don't know how it happened but I then found myself dating after years of being single. Peter took me to clubs with live music, sports events with the girls after months together, and sometimes just cooked dinner for me after a long shift.

Peter Janssen had a way of sneaking up on a person. It was quieter than the love I experienced in the past with Jamie, but I cared for him deeply. He cared for my daughters even knowing they had a relationship with their father. He was more than understanding after his own messy childhood with divorced parents. He never asked for more than I could offer. He took what I gave and never complained. He patched me up after I thought I wouldn't love again.

Jamie and Peter were on opposite ends of the spectrum when it came to their looks. Peter was tall with enough muscle definition to hint at his activeness. He was blonde with bright green eyes. He was clumsy, far clumsier than I would attribute to someone in his profession. He wasn't ruggedly handsome like Jamie with his Highlander appearance; he was more of the Hollywood variety. I considered men who looked like him to be way out of my league. Yet, Peter set his sights on me when any woman and a few men in the hospital desired him.

With the girls gone, we had more time to spend together. He adored them, but it wasn't always easy to arrange time to ourselves when my mom had her own plans or during the school year when there were so many different things the girls had to do. He decided a date night was in order to take my mind off the girls being gone. He knew how much I missed them, especially given the unique custody arrangement we had.

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “Oh Claire,” he murmured softly as I nuzzled into his side. It was a bit chilly out. “You know I enjoy being with you.” We were by the harbor now, and the dark, filmy water was gorgeous this time of night with the lights of the city reflecting off it displaying the city of Boston.

I kept silent, knowing he was building up to something. A knot formed in my stomach as nerves got the best of me.

In a move that was entirely unexpected, Peter dropped to his knee, quite smoothly. My mouth fell open in surprise or horror, I wasn't sure which it was yet. “Claire, I love you. When I spilled coffee on you, I never thought you would agree to an actual date with me.” We shared a nostalgic smile of that long ago day. “I’ve fallen more in love with you as time has passed by, and I love your daughters as well. I know you were a bit nervous when we started dating, but I’ve seen you. I see your beautiful soul and spirit in the way you interact with your child and your patients, and everyone around you. I’m going to ask, but you don’t need to answer now. I will give you all the time you need to think about it. Will you marry me?”

Tears swarmed my cheeks as I was utterly speechless. No words came to mind. Peter wasn’t dismayed or disheartened by my reaction as if he prepared himself for it. He flashed me a smile and gave me the box. His lips were on mine and it didn’t matter if I had an answer for him yet or not. I let his lips take me away.

My eyes fluttered open at the ringing of my cell. It was still quite early in the evening, but our after dinner activities tired us out. “Hello?” I answered groggily, not conscious just yet.

“Claire?” My eyes widened at the distraught in his voice. “I’m so sorry.” He apologized, and my heart sped up because there were very few reasons why he would call me and apologize.

“No…no… what’s wrong?” I muttered, unable to control my panicking thoughts. My mind raced a million miles per second. “This can’t be happening again.” I cried. “Please.”
He was crying and it was hard to understand him. “We were at Lallybroch. I took the girls for a ride, and Isla was knocked from her horse. I wasn’t there to protect her.”

Peter was staring at me with inquisitive, empathetic eyes. He squeezed my hand to offer me comfort, but I didn't want his comfort in that moment. A part of me buried deep inside craved the hand of another man, one who took the best of me when he left.

I was already booting up my laptop to start the process of booking a ticket because no matter what I couldn't stay here without worrying. “Is she okay? Was she unconscious? Have you been to the doctor? Jamie, I need you tell me what’s going on.” I couldn’t believe this was happening. It was always a worry of mine when I sent them to visit their father. I was terrified they would be injured or worse and I would be too far away to do anything.

“I-I, C-Claire we are at the hospital. She hasn’t woken up yet. The doctors haven’t said much.” Tears fell unabashedly from my eyes. “Please don’t cry, I can’t handle your tears. Please,” he begged me from three thousand miles across the ocean. “She’s being transferred to Edinburgh as they are better equipped to take care of her.”

Jamie shared the details of what hospital she would be at, and what the doctors told him so far. I was trying to stay calm, but everything was screaming on the inside. I couldn’t stop thinking about the worst outcome.

Peter helped me pack a back. “Take a breath,” he held my hands in his. “My mother always said not to borrow trouble. At the moment, the doctors say she’s stable. Until they perform tests, you know she’s perfectly fine. Isla is a strong girl.” He kissed my hands and I found myself relaxing under his warm, tender gaze. "She'll be in a city where the best hospitals usually are."

He was right. I was automatically going to the worst outcome because of past experience. I needed to calm down, or I wouldn’t be any use to anybody. “What did I do to deserve you?” I asked him.

He merely shook his head and smiled tenderly at me. He dropped me off at the airport on his way to work. “Send my best to Isla.” Isla wasn’t necessarily his biggest fan. I knew she still had dreams of her father and I getting back together. She didn’t mind Peter, but he was far from her favorite person. She tolerated him, and on occasion fell for his charm. She tried her best to keep a distance between them, but I think she was beginning to understand her dad and I getting back together wouldn’t happen. I hated to disappoint her, but it wasn't feasible. Bree adored Peter though, and was always running off in the hospital to find him.

I was on a plane five hours later with a short layover in London. It was the best I could do under the circumstances. I wanted to be there the moment Isla woke up, or at least be there to comfort her during her hospital stay. She hated hospitals. When she was five she had her appendix removed, and spending time around the other sick children scared her.

I couldn’t stop fidgeting and shifting my position the entire duration of the flight. I was too jittery to take a proper rest. I wouldn’t be able to sleep until I was with my children.

My seat companion sent more than a few irritated glares in my direction, but I ignored it. I stared pointedly ahead. I wanted no distractions. My only focus was my daughter.

Unfortunately, I didn’t count on my body succumbing to exhaustion.

*I climbed across the mountain tops*
*Swam all across the ocean blue*
*I crossed all the lines, and I broke all the rules*
But, baby, I broke them all for you
Oh because even when I was flat broke
You made me feel like a million bucks
You do
I was made for you
For you

October 2000

It took Jamie two months to gather up the courage to ask me on a date. I was actually rather infatuated with him by this point.

I kept hinting, hoping he would get it. Either he was oblivious, or he was intentionally ignoring it. I wasn’t sure which one I preferred. At least if he was unaware, it didn’t mean he wasn’t interested. I refused to think about the other one.

He stayed with his uncle in the city while he attended school. However, he might as well have been living with me for all the time he spent at my family’s home. It was during one of our Saturdays together, where he asked me out.

I hadn’t noticed the nervous energy he was carrying around. I attributed it to the stress of sixth form. He was under a lot of pressure from his family, and he took it all fairly well. He was dedicated to his studies which I admired. He was in several language courses.

I felt the heat of his gaze on me when I returned from the kitchen with our beverages. There was something different in his eyes. I hadn’t seen it since our initial spark of attraction on the train.

Without asking, his lips brushed against mine. It was a slight press, which he deepened immediately when I didn’t protest. My arms wrapped around his neck. It was everything and nothing all at once.

His hands squeezed my hips and pressed me tighter against his body. It was natural. We fit together like two pieces of a whole. His scent surrounded me, and I’ll admit my brain went a bit fuzzy. His heat enveloped me or was that his tongue. All I felt was the shape of him, and I knew then we belonged together.

My eyes had drifted shut the moment his lips landed on mine. I could taste him. His lips were soft and melded perfectly against mine. They moved in tandem, and my brain swirled with information. I had never kissed a boy before, and here I was in my sitting room making out with one.

I clung to him as his lips became more insistent. The intensity reached an apex, and I pulled away gasping for breath. My nerves were in a frenzy as I tried to organize myself. “Wow,” I breathed as my fingers traced my lips.

Jamie appeared quite smug, although it wasn’t the only expression floating in his eyes. There was a tenderness I never expected. He fondled a curl before brushing it back behind my ear. His knuckles gently caressed my cheek. I leaned into his touch, wanting to feel the heat of his skin on mine. I was warm inside. I was feeling so many different things at once, I didn’t know where to start in digesting what took place.

“I would like to take ye out on a date Claire,” He stated with dark eyes. Shivers went up my spine at the look he was giving me. “I’ve had feelings for ye for some time, and I wanted to know ye before taking the next step.”
His compassionate nature was perhaps what attracted me to him the most. He cared about my opinions even if the topic didn’t necessarily interest him. He wanted to know all my secrets and stories, and shared more than a few in return. When we weren’t in one another’s presence, we were on the phone talking. I had never craved anyone’s attention before, but I needed Jamie like I needed air. It sounded melodramatic to my brain, and I had sworn never to be one of those girls.

The problem was he snuck in without me knowing it. “Yes.” The end result was a huge smile before he kissed me again. He put everything into the kiss and I returned it with equal fervor. My lips chased his, and I pulled him down on top of me.

We didn’t do anything except kiss, but it was fine. We had time for other things.

Although time had become an issue when my mother arrived home to find us with our tongues down each other’s throats. I had never seen him turn that particular shade of red before, but he wore it well. My mother merely smirked as he babbled incoherently and then excused himself.

She fell into a fit of laughter. “Oh love, you’ve found yourself a good one.” I stared at her in shock, not expecting her response at all. Jamie and I had just touched the surface of what was between us. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he was planning his whole future with you at the center.” I flushed a deep shade of red at her knowing looks.

Mothers possess some sort of extra sense. I was convinced of that.

You see the smile that's on my mouth
It's hiding the words that don't come out
And all of my friends who think that I'm blessed
They don't know my head is a mess
No, they don't know who I really am
And they don't know what
I've been through like you do
And I was made for you

By the time I landed in Edinburgh, it was already the next day. It was around six in the morning and I was exhausted. Jamie managed to invade my dreams, and it was more than likely my anxiety flaring up at the prospect of seeing him again. Almost an entire decade had passed since we last laid eyes on each other in person.

I could at least breathe a sigh of relief that it was Jenny picking me up at the airport. She wore a tired smile, but wrapped me up tightly in her arms. “Oh Claire, I’ve missed ye. Although, this is not the way I wanted to see ye again.”

She took my bag from me and led me to the parking lot. It was strange to be back on this side of the world. “Has there been any updates?” I asked once we settled in the car.

“Aye, she’s woken up once. The doctors say she has a bad concussion, two broken ribs, and she might require surgery for her leg.”

I burst into tears. Jenny was far from alarmed by my reaction. She knew what I feared most. She pulled over to the side and rocked me side to side. “It’s alright. She’s a tough one. She’s a Fraser and a Beauchamp. If anyone can pull through this, she can.”

I sniffled, knowing she was right. “Are you ready?” There were several ways to take her question, and I wasn’t prepared for any of them. I could only nod and pray I could get through the next few days without destroying myself.
And all of these lines across my face
Tell you the story of who I am
So many stories of where I've been
And how I got to where I am
But these stories don't mean anything
When you've got no one to tell them to
It's true, I was made for you
It's true that I was made for you

The Story, Brandi Carlile

Chapter End Notes

It might take longer between chapters as the story progresses. Unfortunately, I don't write sequentially, and as a result the chapters are out of order. I never know what's going to be the next one until I finish writing.
I remember what you wore on our first date
You came into my life
And I thought hey
You know this could be something
'Cause everything you do and words you say
You know that it all takes my breath away
And now I'm left with nothing

Two Is Better Than One, Boys Like Girls and Taylor Swift

CPOV

I honestly was relieved Jenny picked me up from the airport as opposed to Ian or Jamie.

I had known her almost as long as I knew her brother. While Jamie had made his move by kissing me in my sitting room, he waited for our first date. He asked my mother for permission to take me home for our first date. She corresponded with his father as we were both sixteen year olds with raging hormones. She saw direct evidence of that when she walked in on us snogging on the sofa. The whole event was a complete surprise to me to say the least.

October 20, 2000

Mum was acting strange. She sent secret smiles and her eyes twinkled merrily. I deduced it was related to any plans made for my birthday. Mum never did anything elaborate as I wasn’t the type of girl who wanted a huge fuss.

I preferred my birthdays simple to say the least. We usually went to dinner, the theater, or something else that suited my fancy. However, mum had yet to address anything related to celebrating my seventeenth year of life. I was more than a little surprised when I woke up that Friday, and she hadn’t said a word to me.

Breakfast was on the table. Her and Tom sat relaying their plans for the weekend, and yet no one mentioned the day.

As I’ve stated I don’t make a huge deal about my birthday, but Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ, it was still my day. I wanted some acknowledgement especially as it was my last year before I became legal. Mum was usually invested in things like that, and became more than a bit teary about how much we were growing.

I plopped down into my chair with a little more force. I angrily folded my arms across my chest,
which isn’t actually a good way to display your maturity.

Mum barely glanced at me. She simply regarded me with a lift of her eyebrow. I scowled in return at her complete and utter ignorance of the day. I sensed she was delighted by my response. Confusion settled in because something was going on.

Tom snickered and I kicked him. He glared at me as he slathered more jam onto his toast. “God, Claire you would’ve thought someone pissed in your breakfast.”

I rolled my eyes with a huff. Was it honestly too hard to have anyone remember the date? I mean it was October 20, right? My mother and Tom barely paid any attention to me as they continued to eat their breakfast. Tom hurried out the door with a quick kiss to our mother’s cheek and a playful shove for me.

“So Claire, what are your plans for the weekend?” My mouth fell open. “Close your mouth love. Did you not have any arrangements with Jamie?”

I could feel the blush on my cheeks. I still was uncomfortable discussing him with her after what she walked in on. She was like a dog with a bone and knew what to ask. “I mean with the way you two constantly talk and the little display I saw, I would’ve expected a first date before now.”

I sank down into my chair. “I don’t know.” I answered. “He hasn’t said anything about it. He’s busy with school and sports.” I wasn’t upset as we hadn’t made anything official.

There was a knock on the door. Mum jumped up quickly before I could even get out of my seat, almost as if she were expecting it. My eyebrows rose as I tried to figure out what was happening.

When she returned, she wasn’t alone. Jamie accompanied her, and I knew they could tell I was confused by his appearance. “Wh-what are you doing here?” He had an early morning practice, or that’s what he told me when he ended our phone call the night before. If he had lied, I was going to be quite pissed.

He rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. “Yes, well I wasn’t entirely truthful with ye. I’ve arranged for a surprise for yer birthday.”

Mum glowed with delight. “Happy birthday darling,” she crowed happily, throwing her arms around my neck.

I’m not normally slow on the uptake, but I was thoroughly puzzled by what was happening. “Uh, we have school.” I said dumbly.

“I’ve already called to tell them you won’t be in.” I shot mum a look. “Jamie is taking you with him home for the weekend.” I don’t know why, but she was more excited than me. “Don’t worry about packing a bag, I already took care of it.”

She pointed to me weekend bag by the door. The pieces were slowly coming together. Mum’s strange behavior suddenly made sense. “Tom?”

“Oh, he knew as well. He wanted me to tell you happy birthday from him since he won’t see you this weekend.”

Everyone had pulled a quick one on me. I actually believed they had forgotten. “Well, you have a train to catch. Again happy birthday, and don’t forget to call.” She ushered us out the door before I could ask any more questions.

I smiled shyly at Jamie as he took my bag and my hand. Everything was new between us still. It
wasn’t uncomfortable though. Inside, I was all warm and tingly, and enjoying his thumb rubbing the back of my hand.

The train ride was memorable. It wasn’t lost on either of us that we met on a train. We shared stories, laughs, and enjoyed each other’s company. Somewhere along the way, I fell asleep on his shoulder. When I awoke, he was stroking my curls and whispering sweet nothings in my ear. I feigned sleep as I enjoyed his touch. I didn’t want to make him feel awkward about it. We were making developments in our shared new status as a couple.

So maybe it's true, that I can't live without you
   Well maybe two is better than one
   There's so much time, to figure out the rest of my life
   And you've already got me coming undone
   And I'm thinking two, is better than one

It was almost five when we arrived in Inverness. I was quite tired after the long journey across England and Scotland. The air was bit cooler as we were farther north than London. Luckily Jamie expected this and wrapped his jacket around me.

I smiled gratefully up at him as he led me through the station to the car park. Waiting for us was a girl not much older than us. She had black hair and dark blue eyes. Her skin was fairer than mine, and I noted she was quite a bit shorter than me.

From the way Jamie spoke about her, I was expecting someone closer to his height. I was surprised he was terrified of her. She looked perfectly harmless.

I felt her eyes on me as took in my appearance. As we got closer, Jamie placed a hand on the small of my back. “Dinna let her fool ye,” he whispered. “Her bark is worse than her bite.”

I hid a smile. Somehow I didn’t find that same conclusion. From all the stories he shared, his sister had a temper, possibly one to rival his own. It was probably the Fraser in them. Although I had heard about red heads.

“Jenny,” he greeted her with a kiss to her head. “This is Claire.” His eyes were pleading for her to be nice.

She rolled her eyes at him. “It is nice to meet ye Claire. I’m sure this dolt has been fillin’ yer head with all sorts of nonsense about me.”

I giggled into my hands at Jamie’s affronted glare. “Dinna believe her Sassenach, tis her jealous side. She is green because I am the better out of the two of us.” He puffed out his chest, and I was strongly reminded of Tom.

Jenny and I shared a look of contempt. What was it about younger brothers? “Oh lord, Jamie if ye want the girl, that willna impress her at all. Put the bags in the back.”

She led me to the passenger side and I slid in, leaving the back for her brother. “He isna used to bein’ around girls he hasna grown up with. All the girls he knows are local. It’s fascinating he would fall for a Sassenach. Not that there’s anything particularly wrong with bein’ English, it’s just not common in this part.”

Once Jamie was fastened in, we made our way to the family property. He talked about his home constantly. He spoke of hunting with his father and fishing with his best friend in the summers. He told me stories about the history of the property, how his ancestors had married in the eighteenth century against the families wishes. There was an agreement for the couple to live on a freehold
to prevent any trouble as they weren’t supposed to be together.

There was a small village surrounding the property, Broch Mordha. There were also several tenants who farmed on the land.

The family home was built in 1702. Over time though, the family modernized the house as while it was quite with the times, the house required updates every few decades. Then electricity came to exist, and the whole house needed a remodel.

When we pulled up to the structure, I was more than a bit surprised. I imagined it fairly smaller, despite Jamie’s stories. It was a handsome three-story manor of harled white stone, windows outlined in the natural gray stone, a high slate roof with multiple chimneys.[1]

It was beautiful. I easily pictured a younger version of the boy in the backseat running around the property, driving everyone around him mad with his antics. He seemed to be the restless type with perhaps too much energy in his stores. I glanced back at him to find his eyes glued to the house. His eyes met my own and a grin formed on his beautiful face. Those slanted blue eyes crinkled at the corners. He was experiencing joy at being able to share all of this with me.

It was quite the birthday present.

Now

“How is yer work?” She asked casually, although her tone suggested it was anything but.

I pursed my lips in thought. “I have a confession.” Her eyebrows rose, but her eyes remained on the road. “The man I told you I was seeing, he… proposed.” The last part was whispered as I still hadn’t quite processed it myself.

If anything, her brows traveled further up her forehead. “Is that not a good thing? I thought you loved him.” Jenny was the only person I knew would understand. She had been there from the beginning. “Or is it because you love someone else more?”

Tears clung to my lashes. “I’m the worst person in the history of the world.” I sobbed. “There’s a perfectly respectable man waiting for me to answer and I’m still not over the one who broke my heart.”

“Weel, I’m not going to tell ye what to do Claire. Yer almost thirty-five years old, and ye canna figure Jamie into the picture. We’ve all done this before. I’ll admit I was more than devastated when ye first separated and then pursued divorce legally and through the church, but haven’t ye caused each other enough pain?” We’d caused each other more than a fair bit. “All the grief ye went through and the other stuff…”

Jenny was the only person I confided in following the aftermath of my marriage. She encouraged me and listened with a somewhat impartial ear. She never revealed to Jamie things I told her, or else he would’ve been back in a blink.

“I guess it’s more than strange to consider marrying again. When I agreed to it the first time, well I thought that would be it. I meant my vows and the whole forever thing.” My eyes fell to my hands and my empty ring finger. “I haven’t seen the man in almost a decade, yet the thought of him causes my heart to beat. Yet, I know I cannot allow myself to fall back into it. What we shared is in the past. All we share now is two girls, one of whom is in the hospital.”

She glanced at me skeptically. “Okay, remember that because anything between ye would be complicated. I mean ye live stateside and he lives here. I canna imagine how a relationship would
work. Yer Peter cares for ye and I kent ye love him. It doesn’t always have to be a loud love. There was actually someone before Ian.”

I tried to cover my shock, but my mouth sort of fell open in surprise. I knew they hadn’t actually started dating until they were both in university. However, it was obvious to everyone who knew them. They sent shy and secretive glances across the dinner table. They jumped when accidentally touching, the flushed face, etc.

“I dated a boy named Callum during my first two years at university. I’m ashamed in many ways because I was harboring feelings for Ian. However, I think I needed the relationship. It helped me to realized if I never got to be with him, well it would be okay.” She was silent for a moment. “He was kind to me when I was homesick. He didna know anything about me and hadn’t seen me grow up, yet he was interested. He listened to me talk all the time, mind ye.” Her eyes caught mine briefly.

“I could’ve just as easily been happy with him. I suppose we set our minds on one person, but that’s not always true. We shared something special, and I hold a fondness in my heart for him. He was my first love.” She admitted.

I didn’t know what to say. “I thought it was Ian.”

“Yes, well I never told ye about Callum. He was what I needed, and sometimes I think about him. It’s not to say I don’t love Ian or what we share, but it’s strange sometimes to imagine how different paths could lead ye to a completely different life. As I said, I loved him. I wouldna have minded being his wife. It didna work out that way. I don’t want ye to think of Jamie when ye consider Paul’s potential.”

I finally understood what she was getting at with her story. Even though I had a long and sordid history with Jamie, and there were still plenty of feelings involved, I couldn’t allow myself to get caught up in it. While my heart in many ways belonged to him, we tried. We put so much effort into our marriage, but by the end it couldn’t erase the feelings of contempt. Nor could I forgive him.

Although, a part of me already had, I clung to my anger and my sorrow. They were my only weapons to protect my heart.

I remember every look upon your face,
The way you roll your eyes, the way you taste
You make it hard for breathing
’Cause when I close my eyes and drift away
I think of you and everything’s okay
I’m finally now believin’

Jenny allowed me to have a moment to myself while in the car park. She stood at a respectful distance from the car as I had a good cry and cleaned myself up.

My daughters certainly didn’t need to see me post-meltdown. “Ready?” She held a hand for me, which I took gratefully.

“Ye ken I thought it was just the girls that were American, but Claire yer not as English anymore.” The corners of her lips twitched, and I knew she was teasing me.

“Well if you can’t beat them then join them.” The elevator doors opened and she led me onto the ward.
I saw Bree before she saw me. She was sitting patiently outside a room with her legs swinging back and forth. Her curls were a mess and I saw tear tracks on her little face.

I rushed to her and pulled her into my embrace. “Mommy?” She cried into my neck. “It was so scary. She was riding and then…” she hiccupped as tears continued to fall. I rubbed her back soothing as I had when she was an infant. It was a gesture that always seemed to calm her down. She pushed back with water blue eyes. “I tried to help, but the horse was spooked. She fell off.” The guilt was in her eyes.

“Bree, it wasn’t your fault. You couldn’t have know what was going to happen. Luckily, I think your sister will be just fine.” I brushed away tears and ran my fingers over the contours of her face. It was pathetic how much I missed her. She had barely been gone a week, and it felt as if ages had passed. “She sustained some serious injuries, but she will heal. I know it’s scary to feel helpless,” my mind flashed back to a pool of blood. “But you did the right thing by getting your dad immediately.” I saw my fingers reaching for the phone just out of my reach. “Your quick thinking saved her life. You told everyone not to touch her because you knew that from your time at the hospital. You were very brave.” She smiled a little. The worry wouldn’t fully disappear until her sister was all healed.

“Now what’s going on with your hair?” She shrugged her shoulders.

I pulled my brush out of my purse and began to try to detangle it. It allowed me a few more minutes to compose myself. Jenny sat beside us, but focused her attention on the news.

I plaited her hair and kissed her head. “I’m going to go check on your sister now.” She nodded. “You stay here with your Aunt Jenny and be a good girl.”

The door was closed, probably so Isla could get some rest. I hesitated for a second before pushing open the door.

Isla was tiny in the bed, or at least it was my perception. Her face was covered in scratches and a few bruises. Her leg was elevated and swollen. I knew I might be agreeing to a surgery in the distant future. She was asleep. I imagine the drugs they had running through her system were assisting with that.

At my entrance, a mop of red hair popped up. His blue eyes found mine and it was if it were seventeen years ago.

“Claire,” escaped him before he even realized his lips were moving.

“Hello Jamie,” I said in return.

There was sleepy look in his eyes, but from the dark circles underneath, I knew sleep was hard to come by. I suppose I wasn’t looking much better myself.

I moved to Isla’s side and stroked her face. Her face relaxed in her sleep. “That’s the first time she’s looked like that since they transported her here.” I detected the sadness in his tone.

“She’s not used to being sick without me around.” I explained as I took a seat, my eyes never leaving her prone figure.

My hand grasped hers. Her fingers twitched slightly.

“I didna think this would happen. All the girls were there, and Maggie is good with the horses.”

I held up my free hand to stop him. “It’s alright. I know you would never let anything intentionally
bad happen to either of them.” He turned away his face to wipe away his tears. His mind a million miles from here. “Accidents happen. We will discuss with her doctor the situation with her leg. I promise I don’t blame you.”

Although at one point in time, I blamed him for all the wrongs in my life.

“Thank ye, is there anything I can get you?” He was trying his best.

I shook my head. “I’m not hungry. I think if I tried to put anything in my stomach, it would come back up.”

He nodded, absorbing my words with a thoughtful expression. He had aged as I expected he would. I suppose in my mind he stayed twenty-five years old. I did my best to avoid talking him face to face and saved those interactions for the girls. All of our business was conducted the old fashioned way over the phone.

His hair was a bit longer and darker. He had a few more laugh lines by his eyes and mouth. He aged quite well, and although he wasn’t happy at the moment, I knew he was happy overall.

He was nothing like the dour, regretful man who carried around his guilt. There was a lightness he didn’t possess before, something that disappeared the moment everything went to hell in a hand basket. He was eating regularly again and regained what he lost. There was more muscle. He looked good.

“Ye look good Claire,” he was recalling my own appearance at our last meeting. I wasn’t exactly ready for the cover in Cosmo. “Have ye talked with Bree?” He was trying, but it was hard to have a conversation. I vowed to myself that I would never see him again, or at least I wouldn’t have to until the girls graduated.

I sighed. “I did. She’s tired. If you want, I’ll stay with Isla. You can take Bree to your house to sleep.” His eyes narrowed as he realized my choice of words. I hadn’t meant them the way he took them.

He left the room in a bit of a huff. I ignored it because miscommunication was normal between us. “I’ve made a dog’s breakfast of this.”

I remember every look upon your face,
The way you roll your eyes, the way you taste
You make it hard for breathing
’Cause when I close my eyes and drift away
I think of you and everything’s okay
I’m finally now believin’

[1] Outlander, chapter 26

Chapter End Notes

I’ve developed a strange habit of not writing sequentially. The chapters are all out of
order, and I have no idea which one goes next until I finish. Thanks to everyone who's commented, given a kudos, or who has just read the story.
Yesterday

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yesterday all my troubles seemed so far away.
      Now it looks as though they're here to stay.
      Oh, I believe in yesterday.

-Yesterday, The Beatles

JPOV

I slid lower in the chair as my eyes drifted close. The last twenty-four hours was catching up to me, and not in a good way.

They were worried about her ACL. There was a good chance she tore it when the horse flung her. I didn’t understand all of the medical terminology, and I wished Claire was here to explain it to me.

Jenny left to pick up Claire up from the airport. She somehow managed to catch a last minute flight out of Boston with a small layover in her hometown. Most of my night was spent comforting Isla as she cried out in pain. The dosage of drugs was increased until she was completely knocked out.

Overall, she fared well. There were a few abrasions requiring stitches, and there were several nasty bruises marring her body. Two of her ribs were broken causing a few difficulties breathing. The doctors told me there wasn’t much to be done there except wrap some bandages around her ribs and pain medication. The ribs would heal on their own.

The worst part of the night came when Isla woke up and cried for Claire. I tried to soothe her, but she pushed me away. “Mommy,” she sobbed, her face red with exertion. “I just want my mommy.”

I sympathized with the lass as I recalled a few hospital visits myself after my mother died. I loved my da, but there’s something about the presence of a mother.

Bree stayed with Jenny at the house after I calmed her down. Jenny said she cried the entire time they drove up here until exhausting herself. Bree made it known she wanted Claire as well. I was helpless for the first time. It reminded me of the first summer I had both girls. Bree was two and Isla four. Isla knew me far better than her sister, as a result Bree spent several nights crying for her “mama.” I had to call Claire, which was sometimes awkward because she was in the middle of a surgery.

It took a few summers for Bree to not ask to call her mother multiple times a day. Isla was more independent, not to say she wouldn’t hop on the phone if her mother was on the other side.

Those were the moments I regretted leaving Boston. Both girls were growing up on the other side of the world believing it was perfectly acceptable to have a father who saw them a few weeks out of the entire years. Sure we supplemented with phone calls and FaceTime chats, but it couldn’t make up for the dance recitals, sports games, report cards, school plays, and teacher conferences I missed out on. Everything came secondhand.

When I left, I never imagined this would be the life I was leading. I thought I was leaving only
Suddenly, I'm not half the man I used to be.
There's a shadow hanging over me.
Oh, yesterday came suddenly.

Isla’s brow scrunched up in her sleep as shifted. A painful murmur of “mommy” left her lips.

“Shh,” I stroked her long, dark red hair. “Your mother is almost here.” She must have understood as her body relaxed in slumber.

It wasn’t much longer until Claire arrived. My body knew the exact moment she was near. I could almost smell her perfume enter the room. My body sense heightened and tensed in anticipation. I frowned as she hadn’t entered, then I heard voices in the hall.

I almost forgot entirely about Bree. She was out in the hall with no one to watch her. She was on her iPad watching a movie or playing games. She couldn’t enter the room without crying, and I didn’t want to traumatize the lass. It was the last thing anyone wanted or needed.

After what seemed like forever, she entered the room. The first thing I noticed about her was the hair. Instead of her curly locks, she wore it straighter. It was a bit past her shoulders, shorter than I had seen before. Then I saw the tired expression on her face. Her eyes were entirely on our daughter. She hadn’t spotted me yet.

It gave me extra time to fully taken in her appearance. She was thinner having lost the remainder of the fat from her youth. Claire was always slim, but she still had a roundness. Although, she still filled out her jeans nicely. Unexpectedly, I also noticed the slight tan to her skin.

When I thought of her through the years, I imagined her constantly in the hospital or driving the girls around. It never occurred she had something resembling a private life. There were things we never talked about, too many.

Why she had to go?
I don't know, she wouldn't say.
I said something wrong.
Now I long for yesterday.

Somehow, we had a disagreement within five minutes of being in one another’s presence after all these years.

She said the one thing sure to get a reaction from me. It did. I stormed out.

Claire was an intelligent woman. She had been bright and precocious since she was a babe. She never said anything she didn’t mean. I learned the hard way in the past how cruel and direct her words were, and how I never wanted them aimed at me again. Words were her weapon of choice.

What she implied with her biting comment was the temporary nature of our girls’ stay here in Scotland. It was my home. She meant Bree and Isla belonged in Boston, and I understood she wasn’t wrong. When people asked the girls where they were from, they always responded with Massachusetts. It garnered quite a few stares, especially from friends and coworkers. I was Scottish, but my daughters were not.

I had at least considered my home to be a second home for them. While it wasn’t the primary one, it was theirs.
The problem with Claire’s anger was she let it speak for her. All of these years of peace between
us were a result of thousands of miles in distance between us. I didn’t have to see her, and she
didn’t have to see me.

*Yesterday love was such an easy game to play.*

*Now I need a place to hide away.*

*Oh, I believe in yesterday.*

I collected Bree who was dozing in the hallway. I carried her to the car. Her warm weight was
comforting to me. I needed to feel grounded, and holding her in my arms was perfect. I inhaled
her sweet scent and felt her tiny breaths against my neck. I laid her down in the backseat and
buckled her in.

The drive home was uneventful. My mind ran through the words we said and the ones we didn’t.
Her eyes were a swirl of emotions. I couldn’t identify all of them. There was one I knew all too
well though, grief. I’m not sure it ever went away. I saw anger as well and remorse.

Jenny agreed to stay at the hospital with them. She was running on far more sleep than I was. As
soon as she saw my stricken face, I was pulled into a tight hug. “She dinna mean it. She’s a
mother worried about her child. She hasna had time to think through it all yet.” I nodded
despondently.

I hadn’t agreed. If Claire could not forgive me in nine years, I doubted she could in a few hours.

The next day I awoke later than usual.

I laid in bed pondering over yesterday’s events. Christ, she was beautiful and ornery. I saw the
fiery passion and devotion in her eyes the moment they landed on our daughter. She was
determined to see to Isla’s care, and comprehend the situation fully by bullying doctors and nurses.

I knew Claire. While there were changes, underneath it all she was the same girl I met on the train.

My emotional and physical reactions have yet to change when she’s in my presence. It’s like
every nerve ending in my body. I feel when she’s close, and I automatically crave the touch of her
skin. I want her hand in my mine, smooth against rough. I want her small hands engulfed in mine
as our fingers slide into place. Something continued to draw me to her.

She frustrates me to no end, but I’m fully aware I’ll never love another woman like her.

I rubbed the ‘C’ tattoo on my ring finger where I knew Claire had a matching ‘J’ tattoo. I pledged
myself to her, not for the moment, but for the rest of existence. There was never going to be a
single minute where I didn’t want her.

My actions unfortunately spoke otherwise. I was caught up in my own world. I let the best thing
to happen to me go without a fight. I stared at her as she signed away any ties to me. I didn’t raise
a single protest as she filed documentation or when she watched me move out of our apartment.

The door opens to reveal a bleary eyed Bree. Her fists were rubbing the sleep out of her eyes as
she trudged closer to me. “Daddy?” Her voice floats across the room. “Can we go back to the
hospital now? I miss mommy.”

*Why she had to go?*

I don’t know, she wouldn’t say.

I said something wrong.

Now I long for yesterday.
When we were both ready to go, Bree slid into the backseat and stared out the window as we drove through the city. She maintained her steely silence from the moment I set her down in her bed until we reached the hospital.

Her reactions were quick as she unbuckled herself and opened/closed the car door. She waited impatiently for me by the entrance. Her hair was still braided. I swallowed a sigh, knowing it was another thing I was unable to do for my daughters. It was ridiculous to feel such a way, but I found myself often measuring my parenting against Claire’s.

While the girls censored themselves, I filled in quite a few blanks. Despite their grandmother living with them to help out, Claire still took an active role. In between consultations and surgeries, she was running bake sales, carpool, and hosting slumber parties. She was doing it all by herself with some assistance from her mother. She even repacked the girls’ suitcases when they traveled to save room.

It was hard not to envy how effortlessly she performed her tasks.

Jenny was gone when we arrived. I figured she probably found a room at a nearby hotel. She was bone tired, and I felt guilty for taking her away from her family. Her kids were not provided long summer breaks like my own.

If I tried to shoo her away though it would only backfire in my face. Besides, she wouldn’t leave until she had something good to report back on the homestead.

Bree bounded into the room without a thought. I followed directly behind her. Claire’s head was buried in Isla’s lap as she slept soundlessly. Her hand clutch the smaller one tightly.

What was surprising was Isla’s wide blue eyes open and staring at her sister. Her face attempted to mask the pain, but from what the doctors told me it would be a while before they could attempt to wean her off the strong medications. The amount of pain she was experiencing could cause further issues without it.

“Hi dad,” she croaked.

I poured her some water and held the straw to her lips. She tried not to move too much to allow Claire some rest. I knew she had not slept on the plane for she worried over our baby. Her long journey was catching up to her.

Bree sat beside her sister. “You were sleeping for a long time.” I heard her choke back her tears. “I was scared you wouldn’t wake up.”

I scooped Bree up and planted her in my lap. “It’s okay. Both of my little loves are going to be fine. Isla is awake now, and while she’s got a recovery ahead of her, the doctors believe she will heal perfectly.” There was no need to worry either of them.

Isla’s eyes darted to ward her mother’s head. She licked her chapped lips. “How long has mom been here?”

“She arrived yesterday. Bree and I went home and slept for a while.”

Both girls chewed on their lips nervously as if not believing my full statement. “Daddy, I heard you and mommy. You were mad at each other. You were shaking when you left the room.” I hadn’t realized how apparent my anger was.

“We had a bit of a disagreement. Your mother and I said some things we both regret. I am happy she’s here to make yer sister feel better.”
They exchanged glances and I knew they were having a conversation with their eyes. “It’s okay if you want her here too.” Isla said. “We know you’ve missed her. You were friends first right?”

I pursed my lips thoughtfully. She wasn’t wrong about how I relationship started. I never considered the cliché related to best friends falling in love. There were only usually two end results. The first was that they remained perfectly happy together. The other was they pretended they would continue to be best friend, but in reality what they shared was gone. There were of course areas of grey, but Claire and I fell firmly into the latter.

“Yer mother was my best friend.” I admitted to them. “I can’t imagine never meeting her.”

“How did you meet?” Isla asked, her face scrunched up.

“Weel, it was on the train from Inverness. See yer mother visited her uncle for the weekend. He was doing research in the area. I was leaving home to attend school in London. I was to stay with uncle in the city, which was a new experience for me. When I had gotten on the train, yer mother was already sitting. I asked if I could take the seat across from her. I ken my presence annoyed her as she held back a scowl, but remained polite and curt. Then I somehow managed to charm her by introducing myself. We spent nearly the entire trip sharing about ourselves.” I closed my eyes as I pictured that long ago day with a fresh faced, pensive Claire.

The years were kind to her as she truly grew into her beauty. She was one of those women who looked even better as she aged. “I thought she was beautiful. I almost told her, but I was embarrassed.” I noticed a slight shift of Claire’s body. “I thought this girl had to be way out of my league. She was intelligent, had a good sense of humor, and was undeniably gorgeous. Although, I dinna think she believed it.” She told me often enough how it was hard to believe it when I told her. The only reason she didn’t deny it was because she the sincerity in my eyes.

“We exchanged numbers, but the best moment was when she got up to get off at her stop and the train came to a quick halt. She fell right into my lap. I held her waist and her tiny frame to my own. I even smelled her hair. I kent I shouldn’t have done that, but it was hard to resist temptation. God kent there was no other woman for me on the planet, and chose that particular day to introduce me to the other half of my soul. I rang her later after I got home and we spent hours talking.”

I knew Claire was awake, but I wasn’t willing to call her on it. She was allowing me a moment with our children. She was also probably trying to stave off my mortification at admitting such a thing.

*Yesterday love was such an easy game to play.*

*Now I need a place to hide away.*

*Oh, I believe in yesterday.*

“So do you miss her as your friend?” Bree asked, snuggling into my chest.

I deliberated my answer not wanting to appear to zealous. If I was too earnest well the girls would hope for something that would never come to fruition.

CPOV

I waited for his answer, feigning sleep. I had awoken at the start of his story. Most of the things I already knew, and it was nice to know I hadn’t imagined him sniffing my hair.

While most people would think he was waxing poetic, I sensed the truth of his words. Jamie was a man of his word. It was one of the important life lessons his father instilled him at a young age.
The hurt look on his face gutted me. I experienced my own form of devastation. The tears freely poured from my eyes, and it was a rough night. I shouldn’t have treated him as if he were nothing because it simply wasn’t true.

I supposed the distance allowed me to control my emotions and learn how to channel them. However, it was easier because I didn’t have him in front of me.

There wasn’t a daily reminder. The pain wasn’t pressing in on me. My lungs weren’t constricting as I struggled to control my breath. I wasn’t losing control. I had control. I knew my therapist would be proud at how I’ve managed the situation so far. She wouldn’t be pleased by my cold shoulder treatment.

One of the first skills we worked on was forgiveness. Yet, sometimes I wondered if I possessed the ability in my heart and soul to truly forgive. I carried around all the nasty, angry, heart wrenching feelings until I was ready to burst. And burst I did, right in the middle of an anatomy lab.

“I cherished the friendship yer mother and I had. We didn’t immediately jump into a relationship. We spent time getting to know each other. I suppose what hurt the most when we divorced was losing all those years of friendship. I canna blame yer mom for the failure of our friendship to thrive. Sometimes life is hard, and adults can’t always stay friends.”

Silence encompassed the room. The girls remained silent and probably contemplating their odds at rekindling the relationship between Jamie and myself. I knew what they desired.

I made a big show of stretching and yawning. From the sparkle in his merry blue eyes, Jamie was on to me. “Good morning darling, how are you feeling?” I switched into doctor mode.

“I’m fine,” I fixed her with a look and she amended. “Okay so I’m in some pain. My leg really hurts.”

The doctors informed me last night she had definitely torn the ACL. The way she landed when the horse threw her caused her to land wrong on her own two feet. Unfortunately, that was all it took.

“You’re going to require surgery for your leg, especially if you want to continue playing sports. You tore your ACL, but the surgeon said with physical therapy, it’ll be back to normal.” As a surgeon myself, I understood the risks of any given surgery, and this one was definitely necessary.

Tears clung to her dark lashes as she rested them against her cheeks. “Will it hurt?” Her chin trembled.

“Oh love, you’ll have so many painkillers running through you, you won’t recognize pain in the beginning. I promise. There will be some discomfort, but the sooner you’re back walking, the sooner you’ll be healing.” She nodded absentmindedly. Her mind was somewhere else.

I glanced over at Jamie to find Bree asleep in his arms. The situation was wearing on her, and my heart clenched for both of my little girls. Isla’s eyes drooped and she tried to fight off the medicine, but her body was weak.

“Jamie-“

“Claire-“ we both blushed and glanced away. “Go first,” he said.

I attempted to make eye contact, but found myself unable to hold it. “I want to apologize for my
egregious comment last night.” His lips twitched. “It was never my intention to say all of those things let alone mean any of it.” He clutched Bree tighter. “I guess it’s been a long time since I actually had to share them with anyone. I never fully learned that particular lesson as a toddler.” I smiled wryly. “When you left Boston, it was my assumption we wouldn’t have to face one another again anytime soon.” His crestfallen face caused an ache in my heart.

“Before you say anything, I suppose my actual problem was knowing the possibility you were happy. It’s almost easy in a way to sign the dotted line and your rights away, but the aftermath…” I inhaled sharply, unsure of where I am headed. “What’s left when happily ever after ends, you learn to pick yourself up. For a while, it’s simply pretending until one day you can convince yourself the ache you feel every morning isn’t there anymore. I was terrified all these years about the twinge of pain I expected to feel.” I was lying through my teeth about the ache no longer being there. He didn’t need to know that.

I lifted my eyes to find his own staring back at me. His face was pensive. “I guess it is somewhat a relief to know I can be around you.” I forced out a laugh.

The last time we were truly together without lawyers present, we were two broken individuals trying to find solace through anything we could. I turned to the girls and he to his work.

We skirted around each other. We were tentative and anxious because we both feared what we would say when actually forced to confront the situation.

His face drawn and there was something unidentifiable about his eyes. “Claire, ye ken it was never my intention to leave you such as I did. We said many hurtful things that ordinarily we wouldna have if we weren’t struggling as we were.”

My thoughts drifted to a time left unspoken about. “Do ye still wonder…?” Tears filled my eyes and spilled onto my cheeks. “I know I do. I think about it every day how I left ye alone and-”

“Please,” my voice shook uncontrollably. “Please don’t do this.”

“But we must Claire, I canna have ye hatin’ me for the rest of our lives. I dinna actually think ye do, but I also don’t want yer pain to cause problems now.” My eyes moved to the sleeping figure in the bed. He still knew my heart and soul well enough to know how I processed information. “It seems a verra long time ago now, but really it’s been eight years. I guess I was like you in a way.” I snapped my head up at his words. “I didna want to ken about your life or how happy yer were. I mean I wanted ye happy, which is why I signed the papers. Ye deserved a happy and safe life where the burden of the past was forgotten.”

Except it wasn’t.

I wet my lips with the hope of interrupting him. “I don’t blame you anymore. The truth is I haven’t for a longtime. It would’ve happened with or without you. Some things aren’t meant for us. We can want them, but we can’t have them.”

His sought mine and I read the emotions well. I was something he wanted, but couldn’t have. Bree began to slowly move as sleep left her. I worried she overheard the conversation between us.

Her eyes opened as she blinked a few times to clear them. She took in our expressions and frowned. “What’s wrong?” Her eyes moved quickly to her sister, and she relaxed back into Jamie upon seeing Isla merely resting. “Why are you upset?”

“Mummy and daddy were talking. I promise sweetheart there’s nothing for you to worry about.” I used my soothing voice that usually put her troubles to rest.
Bree seemed in rare form today, and wasn’t going to allow us to escape easily from her questions. “Why were you crying then?” She turned her accusing eyes onto her father. “Did you make mommy sad?” I almost smiled at her protective tone.

“Bree,” my voice snapped. “That is no way to talk to your father. Apologize to him.”

She pursed her pink little lips. Her freckles shone on her pale skin. “I’m sorry,” she grunted.

I sighed. “We were talking about some hard stuff. Nothing you need to worry about.” My eyes pleaded with her.

“What like Gabriel?” Jamie’s head swiveled in my direction and a new emotion crept into his steely gaze.

“Claire?”

Chapter End Notes

Well, some people are close in their guessing, but maybe this chapter will help a little. I love hearing from all of you.
I don’t want to talk
About the things we’ve gone through
Though it’s hurting me
Now it’s history
I’ve played all my cards
And that’s what you’ve done too
Nothing more to say
No more ace to play

JPOV

My eyes lingered on her as she quickly excused herself from the room following Bree’s statement. The tears overflowed and spilt onto her cheeks. She needed her privacy, and I attributed it to the English in her.

There were some noticeable differences to her overall demeanor. She had an inner strength unlike anything I had seen before. She carried herself with confidence and poise that she simply didn’t possess nine years ago. She was twenty-six, and hadn’t a chance to fully mature into her place in the world.

The years had been good to her. She had a few lines around her mouth, which told me there was happiness in her life. It pleased me to know I hadn’t stolen all the laughter from her life with my actions. If anyone deserved to be happy, it was her. I put her through so much over the years, and I was a bit saddened to realize how much better off she was without me.

Her career was solid. The girls told me how much the hospital relied on her and about her raise. She even had her own office. They said she was being considered for chief of surgery when the current chief finally retired. She was already being groomed for the role.

Years ago when she first told me about her dreams and goals, I encouraged her to reach for the stars. She was bright, far brighter than I was. She possessed a self-assurance, but was shy and lacked confidence at the same time. By the time she applied to medical schools towards the end of uni, she had more than a few offers. Several schools in the UK and the States were practically begging her to attend. She always had her sights set on Harvard from the beginning. She spent her life in England and wanted a chance to explore somewhere new.

I didn’t mind following her though. I applied for Master’s programs in all the areas she had. Boston University was far from a bad school. It had the program I desired.

A sigh escaped me when I thought about all the decisions leading us to this moment. I always thought we would reunite under better circumstances. I didn’t want to be responsible for Claire suffering another loss.

Bree and I moved into the family room on the floor to allow Isla to rest easier. Bree settled herself comfortably on my lap. I knew she was exhausted by her fatigued movements and her less than talkative ways. I ran my fingers through her silky curls and she sighed. “Daddy, why doesn’t mommy want to be in the same room as you? How come she left when I mentioned Gabriel?” To be fair, I was more than surprised by the name.
I glanced down to find her eyes fluttering, fighting off her body’s natural inclination to rest. “It’s grown up stuff. Mommy and I weren’t always smart in the past. The last time I saw her, you were almost one.” A faint smile appeared on her lips, but it was more tired than anything.

I thought about the last day in Boston. I had gone over Claire’s house to say goodbye to the girls and pack up the remainder of my belongings.

**October 27, 2009**

I took my time on the stairs, slowing my progress to avoid the inevitable. The ink on the papers was probably dried by now, and it was official I was a divorced man. We would both have to go through the Catholic church for an annulment. I know she respected her beliefs, and wouldn’t want to be considered in bad standing with the church.

She also wouldn’t want it to affect the girls. It wasn’t entirely uncommon amongst Catholics to get a divorce, but many people in the Church never openly addressed the action. It was still frowned upon with many devout Catholics. An annulment essentially meant our marriage wouldn’t be acknowledged by the church, almost saying we were never together.

My feet carried me to the door and I resisted the urge to use my key. It was no longer my apartment. She made that clear several months before when I walked out. I raised my fist and sucked in a deep breath before knocking.

I could hear her in the apartment. It was easy to distinguish the sound of everyone’s footfalls. Isla’s were usually quick and heavy. Claire’s were light and sluggish.

The door opened and there she was. Her hair was pulled up into a knot. She wore an old Oxford sweatshirt and jeans. Her soulful brown eyes were tired and devastated. I knew the situation was hard on her, yet there was nothing I could do to lessen the pain for her. I tried to give her everything I thought she wanted. Now I wasn’t sure if I ever had. I failed her in so many ways, and there wasn’t much I could do to rectify it now.

She gestured for me to enter the residence and I slid past her. I avoided touching her. There was a chill emanating from her. “I’ll hangout in the sitting room while you…” she waved her hands around, words failing her.

I was in your arms
Thinking I belonged there
I figured it made sense
Building me a fence
Building me a home
Thinking I’d be strong there
But I was a fool
Playing by the rules

I nodded curtly and set to work. There wasn’t much I had left to pack. I had two boxes with me that would be sent off to Scotland before my departure from Boston tonight. I didn’t look back at her. I was afraid of what I would see.

Isla was in her room, playing with some toys. She flashed a smile at me when she heard me. Her teeth were tiny and sharp, and I had been on the wrong end of them before. “Daddy!!” She screeched as she ran at me. Her pigtails swinging behind her in little twirls.

She grabbed onto my leg and I carried her with me. “Sweetheart,” my eyes filled with tears as I prepared my goodbye. “Daddy is going to be leaving.”
Her head tilted curiously. “Where you goin’?” Her dark blue eyes stared into my own.

“Well,” I licked my lips nervously. “You, mommy, and Bree live here.” She nodded slowly. “I used to live here too.” Again she nodded her head, although her eyes narrowed. She was quite precocious for her age. “Mommy and I aren’t together anymore. I’m going to move back to Scotland where Aunt Jenny lives.” I knew she didn’t understand the concept of distance, but she knew her aunt lived far away.

Her lower lip trembled. “I not see you?” She threw her tiny arms around me and wailed into my neck. I held her close to me for several moments and rubbed her back. Her body shook with the force of her sobs.

“Shhh… it’s okay.” I used a soothing tone to try and calm her. “I promise you’ll see me.” I couldn’t promise how frequently it would be, but I wasn’t going to just leave her. “You are just going to be here with mommy and yer sister. Will ye do something for me?”

Her eyes peered into mine, so trusting. “Can you look after mommy? She’s going to need you.” She didn’t need me, I thought bitterly to myself. “She’s been sad.” Because of me.

“I make her smile. Don’t worry Daddy.” She told me with such confidence, I struggled to believe she was three years old.

I kissed her head and she kissed my lips. “I miss you.” A few tears fell from her eyes.

I brushed them away with my thumb, my whole hand cupping her face. It was so small. I wondered how much she would grow in my absence. It seemed as if she was a wee bairn yesterday, and then all I did was blink.

The situation was easier to explain to her when she barely had a concept of things like marriage and divorce. If she had been older, I knew it would’ve been far more complicated to tell her what happened between her parents. At the moment, she was accepting of the changes in her life. It helped I had been moved out for two months.

I left her to play with her dolls, but she was a little less shiny. I wasn’t going to make our goodbye harder because she was hurting now too.

Once I moved to the bedroom, it didn’t take long for me to finish packing the rest of my things. I had a few clothes and some books. Most of my belongings were taken care of when I first left.

The gods may throw a dice
Their minds as cold as ice
And someone way down here
Loses someone dear
The winner takes it all
The loser has to fall
It's simple and it's plain
Why should I complain

After taping up the boxes, I set them out in the living room. It was time for me to say goodbye to sweet Bree. She sat in her crib playing and talking to herself. She was such an easy baby except for those first few months with colic. Her eyes sparkled when she noticed me in the doorway. She held her arms up for me to pick her up and I did.

“Da,” she patted my face with her small hands. I kissed each little finger. She giggled merrily, enjoying my attention. “Da dada,” she babbled happily in her sweet baby voice.
I sat with her in the rocking chair. She laid her head against my heart. Her hand beat out a rhythm. I was going to miss so much with her. She had yet to take her first steps. I would miss her first sentence, first injury, first day of pre-school, all of it. I knew though I couldn’t remain in Claire’s vicinity without wanting more. I also was aware my presence hurt her, and I wouldn’t be responsible for causing her anymore harm.

Besides the girls, there wasn’t much keeping me in America. My job had quickly become my least favorite place to be, and I was looking forward to returning to Scotland. The highlands called to me, or maybe it was the coward in me looking for the simple solution.

“I’m going to miss ye Bree.” She sighed softly as she snuggled in. “I hope ye will be good for yer mam. She’s a wonderful woman, and she deserves so much more than me. I want ye to ken that about her. I know it’ll sometimes seem as if she’s being unfair, but it’s only her loving ye.” I knew it was the absolute truth.

A few tears escaped my eyes, but I didn’t wipe them away. I continued rocking and stroking her soft baby hair. Her breathing slowed and I knew she was asleep. I felt her tiny snores against my chest. I sat with her a little longer before settling her in her crib. She barely moved an inch as I stroked her hair.

I stole one last look before closing the door. My last goodbye was for Claire.

I cleared my throat so as to alert her to my presence. She stood up to face me with an unreadable expression. “I-”

“I-“ we both closed our mouths. She gestured for me to talk. “Claire, I know this isn’t what you expected all these years ago.” Her face was still. “I promised better to ye, and I failed in that. I can only say I’m sorry. I want ye to be happy, and if this is the way...” I shrugged in defeat.

Her mouth opened and closed as she composed herself. “Jamie, don’t be a stranger. The girls will be gutted if you don’t call. I promise I’ll send them to you in the summer, although it might be too soon next summer to send Bree. We will work something out.” Her eyes were tender and warm, and her sincerity rang true.

She reached out a hand, which I quickly grasped. I pulled her to me and we simply held each other. I felt her warm tears dampen my shirt, but I stayed silent. Her face tilted up as I looked down, and we shared a parting kiss.

Her lips brushed softly against my own. I tasted the goodbye, the finality of our relationship. All we shared now was two little girls and a history of almost ten years. I savored each second of the kiss and found heaven and hell all over again. My hands cupped her cheeks as we both cried. Our foreheads briefly touched before we pulled ourselves apart.

Her smoky eyes glistened with tears, and I’ll never forget the look on her face. It was a mix of several emotions: regret, sorrow, and something I couldn’t place.

We shared a glance before I gathered my boxes and left. “Have a safe flight Jamie,” she breathed softly. Her voice quivered, but I chose not to look back. If I did, I would never leave.

Bree continued to sleep and I stroked her hair. It reminded me of the moment we shared before I left. The curls were shorter and lighter then. She was more of a strawberry blonde at birth than a full ginger. Now she was an actual person with complex thoughts and opinions, she could say more than ma, da, la, and I missed much of it. I willingly walked away from my whole life.

It’s strange what time does to us. I didn’t know then how many years would pass us by before I
saw Claire again. We had done well with staying to our separate corners of the world. I was aware of where she was, and she knew where I was. Yet, we both stayed away.

If anything, she was a stronger woman, and it happened without me. She didn’t need a man to take care of her or love her. She managed to turn something that could destroy most people and turned it into motivation. I wasn’t sure how she did it. For the first few months, I barely managed to crawl out of bed without proper incentive (Jenny). The depression was overwhelming. I slept and cried mostly.

I found myself listless without any purpose. The girls’ phone calls were the one bright spot in my week. During that time, it was harder to arrange regular calls because of the time difference and Claire’s school schedule. The girls went to bed much earlier and spent the day in daycare.

She was relying on the money her father left her to take care of herself and the girls. I sent money to help in any way I could once I found work. Then I started a business with some relatives, and I was able to send more money. It never occurred to me she wasn’t using the money.

It was sometime after my first Hogmanay back when Jenny took me to speak to someone. Dr. Clarkson was the saving grace I needed in my life. She listened to me for the first several sessions without pressuring me to talk about something specific. If it weren’t for her, I’m not sure how I would’ve found myself in this moment.

She became my friend after the treatment. It would’ve been a conflict of interest otherwise. She even recommended a colleague of hers for me to talk with afterwards.

She put a lot of things in perspective for me in regards to my relationship with Claire.

Mary told me hindsight isn’t a privilege we have after an event occurs. Unfortunately, it’s after that we can look at a situation and realize the decisions that led us to the present. Claire and I were drowning in our own problems separately, which then affected our marriage. Communication became less of a tool and more of a burden. Talking became yelling, and leaving became the norm. In the moment, I was unable to evaluate my actions. It’s hard to know what’s right and wrong until it is in the past.

I’m ashamed to admit how I treated her. While I was working, she was going to school and raising two children under the age of five. Of course, Mary was always quick to tell me not to pin the entire blame on myself. A relationship requires two people and sometimes they fall apart. It’s what you do when it crumbles down that defines you as a person. You have to be willing to build yourself back up and understand that not everything is going to happen the way you want.

I leaned my head back against the wall as my thoughts drifted around. Seeing Claire again brought my tattered heart stuttering back to life. I realized I left it in Boston nine years ago and never got it back.

The problem was I knew she didn’t want me. She was here for our daughter. As soon as she knew Isla was well enough to travel home, she was leaving.

The doctors were already hinting at the improvement in her condition from when she was brought in almost three days ago. I knew Claire was planning to take her home to the States as soon as she was discharged, leaving Bree here for the remainder of the eight weeks I had left. I understood why she didn’t want her to stay here. At home, she worked at one of the best hospitals in the country and she was a doctor herself. It would be easier for her to see a physical therapist in Boston and to visit with her pediatrician.

I rubbed my face tiredly. I felt eyes on me and glanced down to find a replica of my own staring at
me. “How come you don’t date?”

I sputtered incoherently to find a response. “Wh-wh-what?” I asked her stupidly.

“Well mom has gone on dates, why not you?” My eyes widened at the thought of Claire dating someone else. It was another fact I didn’t know about her.

“She has?”

Bree nodded, confusion in her eyes. “What’s wrong?” I cursed myself for being obvious. Claire was free to date whoever she wanted. “Is it because I told you about mommy dating?”

“No, it’s not.” I played with the ends of her hair. “Your mother is allowed to date people. We aren’t married anymore even in the Catholic church.” She nodded her head. “I guess it was just strange to think of her dating. Besides I’ve dated and you both know that.” I pointedly glared at Isla who ignored it.

“Peter is nice.” She informed me innocently. “He and mom have been dating for a while now. Maybe they will get married.” Claire hadn’t told me she was seeing someone long term. I didn’t appreciate her not telling me. “Although Isla doesn’t like him. She pretends to be nice, but then says a lot of snide comments when mom isn’t around.” She chewed on her lip nervously as her eyes darted to her sister’s prone form.

I sensed she wasn’t supposed to say anything about how Isla felt.

_But tell me does she kiss_
Like I used to kiss you?
Does it feel the same
When she calls your name?
Somewhere deep inside
You must know I miss you
But what can I say
Rules must be obeyed

“I have dated. I just havena found anyone worthwhile yet.” Her eyes were full of questions. “When ye’re older, maybe thirty,” she giggled as I poked her ribs. “You’ll meet someone who makes yer heart flutter, yer breath catch, and yer thoughts stop. It’ll all fall into place.” I dreaded the day.

Her face was pensive. “Did mommy do that to you?” She bit her lip nervously.

“She did, but it was a long time ago. It could never work now. I live here, and you guys live in Boston.” I pointed out to her.

“I guess so.” She was unsure of my feelings. “Are you sure?” She was sounding far too much like Isla. “I mean can’t you move to Boston?”

“I think I should explain something to you. I told yer sister when she was about your age. I know you’re aware of her eidetic memory. Well she remembers much of her early childhood, and she knows about when mommy and I were together. She keeps hoping, but sometimes people realize they don’t make each other happy.” I wished more than anything I could’ve made her happy.

“When that happens, they decide not to be together anymore.”

She frowned. “Why though?” It sounded more like a whine than a question.

I ran my hands through my hair. “I don’t know Bree. People change over time.” I changed, not for
“Do you love her?”

“I will always love your mother.” I replied earnestly.

“Well then why can’t you get back together?” I suppose to children it was easy logic. In kid’s movies, love was the answer. If you were in love then there was no question that you were together. Unfortunately, the films never showed what a real happily ever after looked like.

I sat her up and turned her body towards me. “Bree, while I love mommy, it’s different.” Liar. “I love her because she gave me you and Isla. You and yer sister are the most precious gifts, and I treasure ye. I love mommy for being yer mother. That is all.” More lies.

I knew she was unhappy when she chose not say anything in return. I didn’t know how to make her feel better either, so I let her sit there pouting.

I don’t want to talk
If it makes you feel sad

I needed the time to gather my own thoughts. Until she showed up in my life, I was convinced the feelings on my end were more of a platonic nature. She was the mother of my children, but there was an increasing awareness I never stopped loving her.

I saw bits and pieces of the woman she was mixed in with the woman she grew into. She wasn’t different in any obvious ways. She was mature, sure of herself.

I never considered the possibility of someone else being the picture. While the phone calls between us were short and to the point, she never once mentioned she was dating someone. From the way Bree spoke, it was serious.

I spent so much time wallowing in misery and then accepting fate. I wasted my chance with her. She now had someone in her life. He didn’t seem to mind she came with children either.

Claire was probably eager to get back to him. This Peter was the current owner of her heart, and I don’t think anything ever hurt my heart as much. The cracks were there and they were deep. I ached for her, but the sentiment wasn’t returned. I didn’t expect her too either because she was a beautiful woman. She was young, only thirty-four. She shouldn’t have to spend her life alone because of my inadequacies. A woman like her deserved the best.

And I understand
You’ve come to shake my hand
I apologize
If it makes you feel bad
Seeing me so tense
No self-confidence
But you see
The winner takes it all

A thought occurred to me. “Bree?” Her eyes rose to meet mine. “Why did ye mention Gabriel earlier?”

A little divot appeared between her brows. “Well when mommy and grandma are having adult conversations, it’s usually about you, Gabriel, or Peter.”

I sighed. Maybe she didn’t know. “Do ye ken who Gabriel is?”
“Sure,” she peered at me as if I were asking a dumb question. “We go see him every year on his birthday.” I inhaled sharply. “Don’t you know who he is?”

“Yes,” I answered simply. When she realized she wasn’t going to get anymore information out of me, she dug into her bag for iPad. It was amazing how quickly she became absorbed in the tablet. I wondered if it was something Claire dealt with on a regular basis.

I relaxed my head against the wall. There were too many thoughts in my brain.

A hand gently shook my shoulder, and my eyes flashed open to an eye full of Claire. My eyes darted to her cleavage causing me to swallow painfully. I don’t think she noticed as her eyes were focused on Bree. “Isla’s asking for you.” Her smile was warm and reached her eyes.

My flushed hotly as I lifted Bree off my lap. *What was I thinking? It was out of the realm of possibilities.*

I turned my head and watched as she held our daughter close. Although I could’ve sworn her eyes moved in my direction. I wanted to confront her about Peter, but it wasn’t the time. Our priority was the recovery of our child. Truth be told, I had no right to ask her about her private life. I gave up all claims to her when I agreed to a divorce. I did want to discuss Gabriel though as it seemed the topic was far from over.

*So the winner takes it all*
*And the loser has to fall*
*Throw a dice, cold as ice*
*Way down here, someone dear*
*Takes it all, has to fall*
*It seems plain to me*

*Winner Takes It All, ABBA*

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Chapter End Notes

Okay so here’s some basic information on the characters. Also thank you to everyone who’s reading my story.

Isla Faith: October 19, 2006
Brianna Ellen: November 23, 2008
Claire- October 20, 1983
• Graduated sixth form 2002
• Started university 2002
• Medical School 2006; graduated 2010
• Residency completed 2015
• Fellowship 2016
Jaime- May 1, 1984
• Married August 2005
• Claire pregnant the end of Feb 2006
• Second pregnancy end of January 2008
• Divorce papers signed in October 2009
Shine Your Light

Chapter Notes

This is a trigger warning for loss of a child, etc. So read at your own risk.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shine your light down on me
Lift me up so I can see
Shine your light when you're gone
Give me the strength
To carry on, carry on

Shine Your Light, Robbie Robertson

CPOV

I hoped to continue avoiding him, but he finally found me in the chapel. I was finishing my prayers as Isla was rushed into surgery last night for internal bleeding. They’d been worried about the damage done to her leg.

She was in recovery now, but it didn’t ease my fears in the slightest. I shouldn’t have been surprised he discovered my hiding place. Whenever I was worried or stressed, I turned towards God. He did too, except for one time.

“I was wonderin’ if I would find ye here,” he said softly, sitting beside me on the pew. I remained silent. “Claire,” he grabbed my hand. “It shouldna be this hard to communicate with you, but then we spent all those months not talking to each other.”

Tears burned my eyes. “Please not here,” I pleaded with him.

“When then? We almost lost Isla.” He choked back a sob and buried his face in his hands. I instantly missed the warmth from his touch.

I gingerly rubbed his back as his emotions began to catch up to him. “She’s perfectly alright. The doctors believe she’ll make an amazing recovery. She’s strong. She gets it from you.” He fell into my embrace, and I held him.

His sense of guilt was undeniable. I hadn’t exactly helped either. I came in with fierce and unapproachable body language, and blaming him yet again for something else. “Jamie, I owe you an apology.”

He pulled back and began stuttering. I covered his mouth with my fingers. “No please, let me say this. I spent a year hating you, absolutely despising everything about you. But then, when I grew tired from all of my negative feelings, I had to figure out a way to handle them. It wasn’t productive, and I was unable to compartmentalize how I felt about you.” I was ashamed in all honesty. “You didn’t deserve how I treated you, and you certainly weren’t at fault for what happened back then.”
His eyes swirled with a million emotions. “I didna understand.” Confusion was prominent.

I sighed and adjusted myself on the pew. “The miscarriage while the stress from our marriage certainly wasn’t conducive, I was going to lose the baby anyway. It isn’t always clear why it happens. My doctor said I would still be able to bear children, and there was no indication it would happen again.” I lowered my eyes guiltily. “For me, I needed someone to direct my anger at. I already blamed myself for what happened, and then you weren’t there.” Tears spilled onto my cheeks, and before I had a chance to brush them away, his thumbs were.

I leaned into his touch, still not meeting his gaze. “Tell me about it, please Claire.”

I never shared with him what happened. I attempted to move on, and I brushed him off every time he attempted to address the topic. I thought if I could bury it underneath, it would make the problem disappear.

May 12, 2009

I groaned in frustration at the text in front of me. My exams were in another week, and I felt inadequately prepared. The semester had been hard on me.

While I would never classify either of my daughters as a mistake, they were certainly surprises. We had planned on having children later on after I finished medical school at the very least. It seemed to be the ideal time.

Then something unexpected occurred yet again. I was afraid to even tell Jamie because barely two months after Bree, I found out I was pregnant again. We hadn’t been as careful as we should’ve been, but I honestly wasn’t expecting to have the test read positive. We had been exuberant in our celebrating of the holidays, especially since I was given the all clear by my doctor to resume sexual activities.

Now here I was basically in my fifth month of pregnancy for the third time. I certainly wasn’t pleased by the timing, and Jamie wasn’t either.

His work required him to spend a lot more hours at the office. He was sent out of town a couple of times now, and two days ago we had a fight about him attending a conference with his work colleague Britney. I told him she had her sights set on him, and refused to believe me.

He said, “Claire, yer bein’ absolutely ridiculous. She doesn’t see me in that way. We just work on a lot of assignments together.”

I snorted derisively. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me Jamie. You can’t possibly be that naïve. I mean shite! How many times has she requested your help in the last few months? She even rings on the weekend.”

“Are ye jealous of her? Is that the problem Claire? Am I not spending enough time with ye?” His face was red and his chest heaved with the force of his breaths.

I brushed away the tears. It was not the time to be hormonal. “How can you not to see it?” I was baffled at how obtuse he was. Every time I saw her with him when I brought the girls to the office, her eyes were narrowed into slants at the sight of us. She glared at me and doted over the girls.

I once walked in on her massaging his shoulders. He claimed innocence and I believed him. It was her I didn’t trust. She was a slag the way she constantly draped herself over a married man. It was as if she didn’t have any morals. “If you can’t see it then why do I bother?” I threw up my arms angrily.
“I work to provide for you and the girls. Britney is a work colleague and nothing more. Do ye not trust me to remain faithful?” By my lack of reply, he assumed I didn’t. He snatched his suitcase and stormed out of the apartment before I could come up with a reply in my head.

It honestly wasn’t a slight against him. I had more of an issue with her. She picked Jamie knowing we were having difficulties in our marriage. Jamie practically broadcasted our problems to the entire world.

I was quite irritated with him, but I was also extremely horny. The hormones were taking over my body. Regardless, the cow he worked with had ulterior motives. She advertised it enough, and her blouses were a bit too low to be appropriate. I felt undesirable compared to her as I hadn’t even had the opportunity to get my body back before I was pregnant again.

Since I woke up, I experienced uncomfortable pains in my back. I wasn’t worried as I hadn’t seen any blood. I had done research with my first pregnancy, and I was in my third year of medical school.

A sigh escaped me as my mind couldn’t focus on the text in front of me. I gave up studying for the day and crawled into bed. The girls were already asleep thanks to small blessings.

It was hours later when I woke up to find blood everywhere. The pain in my back and abdomen was agony, and I stretched to dial 9-1-1. There was something seriously wrong. I was scared I had already lost him.

May 13, 2009 (Night)

The beeping of medical equipment woke me from my uneasy sleep. The bed was more than uncomfortable, but my doctor requested I stay the night instead of AMA. Although, it was the option I preferred. I wanted to escape the confines of the hospital, one of the few places I felt like myself. All of the machines surrounding me reminded me of the reason why I was there.

It was in the darkness of the room, I noticed his prone figure. I could hear his soft snoring, and I felt myself hating him. Tears pricked at my eyes because I blamed him. It was his fault. He left me, and I lost our baby by myself. I had to deliver a dead baby.

The pain came in waves. I clutched the standard hospital pillow to my face and released my anguish into the starched sheet. There were short pauses as I attempted to recover my breath, but my grief was still under the surface. It burst forth like a dam, and I didn’t want to turn it off. I wanted to feel it all because it seemed to be the only real thing.

I delayed the inevitable after the birth. I was traumatized and the doctors made the decision to sedate me. I was shut off from the agony of knowing my child never drew their first breath. He was dead before he left my body. My guilt crippled me because I had to have done something wrong. Logically, I knew there multiple reasons for a placental abruption, but I couldn’t allow myself to escape my sorrow and shame.

It was slow at first when I came back to myself. My memories had yet to catch up, and I was grateful. I at least expected the moment the birth came back to me as I screamed and pleaded for the doctors to do something to save my baby. Their apologetic eyes and faces full of pity and empathy meant nothing to me. All I wanted was my baby, and they couldn’t do anything. My baby was gone. He never had a chance.

I tried to scream into my pillow, but it was soundless. No sounds came forth. My hands smacked the bed as my body shook uncontrollably with the force of my sobs.
One day ago, I was expecting another child and soon enough I would be burying the same child. I wanted to die. I desired my release from this life to be with my unnamed baby. My baby who never was given a chance. He was taken because I didn’t deserve him.

His arms came around me. He tried to pull me into his embrace, but I resisted him. I didn’t want his comfort. My hands smacked against his arms as I screamed obscenities at him. “It’s all your fault.” I said over and over again as more tears poured from my eyes. My eyes burned with them. “Why?” I asked him.

I couldn’t make out his expression in the dark, but I didn’t want to either. I couldn’t bear to see his heartbroken eyes and the apology that would follow. I didn’t want it from him. “Please leave,” I wanted to mourn on my own without him there. He didn’t have to hold a dead baby. To see the pale pallor of skin that never pinkened or eyes that would never open. The stillness of a baby who wouldn’t experience life.

“Claire, please love let me hold you.” His voice was hoarse with his own tears as he begged me to let him in.

I tried to feel something, anything but I was hollow. I had given all of myself away. I had nothing left. Now I needed to learn how to move on to figure out how to cope with the loss. “Please Jamie, give me this.” My lips trembled with each passing word as I kept myself from my crying anymore than I already had. I knew my eyes were probably red and swollen, and my face all blotchy from the tears. I wanted the privacy to mourn.

His shoulders dropped in resignation. I felt his lips in my hair, but I sat there in a daze. I’m not sure I processed much of anything.

He took the hint and took his leave. The moment I was alone, I turned my head back into my pillow and continued to cry.

I hated God, Jamie, everyone. I didn’t know why I was being punished. My mother would tell me it was God testing me, but it seemed too cruel. My baby was gone, in another place without me.

I cried for myself, for Isla, for Bree, for Jamie. I didn’t know what else I could do. It seemed the only way to empty out my emotions. I fell into a troubled sleep, and when I woke up my mother was there. Her eyes were sympathetic and understanding. While she never lost a child, she did lose a husband. She knew something about loss and how it can overcome you.

“Oh Claire, my love,” her arms came around me in a tight embrace. She rocked me side to side as I buried my face in her neck. The tears fell in a flurry, and I didn’t know I had more. “You’re going to get through this sweetheart. I know it seems hard now. Sometimes things happen we can’t explain.” I enjoyed the comfort of her arms. I took solace and strength from her presence.

She stayed with me through most of the morning before excusing herself. I slept restlessly in her absence, but when she returned, she brought the balm to my soul, my babies.

Isla clutched her grandmother’s hand warily as Bree was her usual happy self. I opened my arms for her and my mother deposited her into them. Bree snuggled into my aching breasts. I knew what she wanted, but I was a bit embarrassed to do anything in front of my mother.

She seemed to sense my apprehension. “I’ll be back in an hour for them.” She winked at me.

Isla had climbed up to snuggle in the bed with me. “Mommy, you ‘kay?” Her sentence structure was developing quite nicely.

I kissed her fiery head. “I’m much better now that you’re here.” I answered honestly. It was the
truth. They were the best medicine a doctor could prescribe.

Bree nursed and I found myself feeling lighter for the first time since it happened. I was by no means over what happened. I just needed to focus on what I did have. “I wanted to tell you something Isla.” While she didn’t really understand what it meant for me to be pregnant, she did know she was going to have a sibling. Her eyes turned on me shining brightly with innocence and trust. “You know how mommy and daddy told you, you were going to have a new brother or sister?” She nodded her tiny head. “Well,” I inhaled sharply, the loss stung sharply. “I’m not going to have a baby anymore. The baby went to heaven.”

“How did I explain to a toddler, sometimes people die for no reason. “God called him. He needed your brother there instead of here.” She accepted the answer easily enough.

I knew one day I would need a better answer to explain what occurred for now I took solace in her never remembering.

Bree dozed off as she nursed, her rosebud lips slackened around my nipple. I covered myself back up and readjusted her limp body. Isla soon went down for a nap against my other side. I held their bodies tightly to my own.

I wouldn’t ever be okay with what happened, but some of my guilt ebbed away. I had two perfectly healthy children. I had much to be grateful for, and I regretted wishing I was taken too. Remorse settled over me because I never wanted to give up watching my two babies grow up.

Four Days Later

I stood at a grave staring at the tiniest coffin imaginable. It was unfathomable such a thing could be made or was necessary at all. Yet, I knew infants died.

My mother took care of all the arrangements with help from Jamie, I suppose.

When morning arrived, I wanted to stay in my bed and ignore the day ahead of me. Nothing was ever going to hurt me as much as burying my child who never took a single breath. The tears subsided after the visit from Isla and Bree, but at night, I heard phantom cries. My hand drifted to my stomach where there were no kicks to be felt. The one thing I was thankful Jamie had done was to remove all of the items we purchased for our son.

There was no evidence another child was expected to join the family by the time I was released from the hospital. It was more than fortunate it occurred at the end of the semester as I was excused from sitting my exams until a better time could be arranged.

Many of my classmates signed a card with condolences and sent an arrangement of flowers. I appreciated the gesture, and I knew Joe was more than a bit responsible.

My professors had even sent their own flowers. I was truly touched.

My brother flew in two days before with his girlfriend. Her name was Elizabeth. She was actually quite lovely, and I found myself on more than one occasion wondering what she was doing with my brother.

“Hey Claire,” he greeted me as he entered my bedroom.

My eyes snapped to his and he was holding me instantly. “I can’t believe this happened.” He let me fall apart in his arms. While we had our differences, Tom was my first friend. Barely a year
We laid there in my bed as he told me about his job and other events in his life. We didn’t have much of an opportunity to chat often with both of our busy lives. “We’re getting quite serious. I’ve considered proposing.” He informed me much to my shock. It was hard to consider my baby brother as someone’s husband. “I had intended for you guys to meet under better circumstances.” His voice was soft, much softer than I had heard from him in the past.

I grimaced at the allusion. “I’m sure I’ll love her. I’ll make sure to tell her about all of your troublemaking ways.” We kept the conversation light, which was what I needed.

It brought me to today. He waited patiently for me to get dressed. He tidied the pearls around my neck when I made no move to straighten them. He held my hand in the back of the car as we made our way to the cemetery.

I was useless for the past several days. The girls spent a lot of time in my room, snuggling and watching television. I couldn’t bear to be parted from them. It gutted me when they were absent from sight, and I knew my family understood. At least, they hadn’t said anything about it.

Jenny was here, but Ian stayed back in Scotland. It was by far easier than arranging for their entire brood to come. I appreciated her presence as I knew Jamie needed someone to support him through this. It just couldn’t be me at the moment, or possibly ever.

I hesitated the moment I caught a glance of the casket. Tom held me close and I buried my face in his shoulder.

My baby was in there about to be buried six feet below. He was going to be alone.

I barely listened as the funeral began. My thoughts were somewhere else, and I knew it was perhaps for the best. What I wasn’t expecting was Jamie to stand in front of everyone.

He smiled faintly, but I read the suffering in his eyes. He was hurting as much as I was, but he was putting up a better mask. “I would like to share a poem.” He carefully composed himself as if knowing the tears threatening to break loose.

“The world may never notice
If a rosebud doesn't bloom:
Or even pause to wonder if the petals fall too soon.

But every life that ever forms,
Or ever comes to be
Touches the World in some small way
For all eternity.

The little ones we longed for
Were swiftly here and gone.
But the love that was then planted
Is a light that still shines on.

And though our arms are empty,
Our hearts know what to do
Every beating of my heart says
“I Remember You” –Unknown

I was deeply affected by his words because of the truth in them. Neither of us would forget Gabriel. While no one else in the world would miss him or notice his absence, we would for as
long as we lived.

Jenny escorted Jamie away as he began to sob. I ached to hold him in my arms, but another part of me held back. I was unable to speak. If I went up there, I would only breakdown and it wasn’t something I wanted to do in public.

I hope you’re dancing in the sky
I hope you’re singing in the angel’s choir
I hope the angels know what they have
I’ll bet it’s so nice up in heaven since you arrived

Dancing In the Sky, Dani and Lizzy

Many of the attendees left after paying their condolences. I received hugs and pats, but none of it registered to me. I didn’t feel the contact. My mother tried to get me to go with her, but I needed to stay. I had to watch them bury my son. Something compelled me to stay.

It was sometime before he was in the ground with a fresh mound of dirt. I squeezed my eyes to prevent another onslaught of tears. It was a bit cold for spring, and I hadn’t worn tights underneath my dress. I at least wore a black coat, which I kept buttoned nicely. The cold felt comforting against my skin. It was as if greeting a long lost friend and I welcomed it. I needed to feel something, anything besides grief and loss.

The headstone wouldn’t be completed for some time. We decided not to put any dates on it. It was the only decision I made in my days of madness. His name was Gabriel Thomas Fraser.

He was in his fifth month of gestation. While he wasn’t a fully developed baby, he looked like one. He was a surprise as I would never use the word accident. I was raised to believe all children were gifts from God and there were no mistakes.

We weren’t as careful with protection as we should’ve been and he happened. He was loved from the moment I knew he was inside me.

A hand touched my shoulder, and I looked into his glassy blue eyes. I know mine were much the same. “Come on Claire, ye should be home.”

I allowed him to lead me away from our son. I glanced back at the fresh mound of dirt covering my baby. I couldn’t help but ask myself why some children had to die. Life seemed to deal the cruelest hands when you weren’t expecting it.

Now

He peered at me, sensing his curiosity I turned towards him. I raised an eyebrow, providing him the floor so to speak. He cleared his throat. “Do ye,” he made a gesture with his hands, “visit him often?”

I sank further into the pew as I considered my words. I didn’t need him to clarify his statement. “The girls and I go every year on his birthday.” I made no mention of it being his death date as well. “We bring flowers, the girls sometimes write notes.” They put effort into what they wanted to tell him. They made wishes for him. He was still their little brother.

The two of them never considered him to be baby, but someone who was growing up as well. They knew he was in heaven, and imagined he aged like they did. Each year, their letters were longer as their thoughts expanded. “The first time we went was probably the hardest. Isla was seven and Bree five. I hadn’t told them about Gabriel before, so they didn’t know where I went every year on his birthday. All they knew was they had a date with grandma in which she spoiled
them rotten. I took them for the first time at Christmas because of something they said.”

The concept of death didn’t strike either of them until they were around seven. Isla’s second grade teacher died in a car accident in the second half of the school year. The school asked all the parents to sit down and have a conversation about it with their kids, and then they talked about it at a school assembly as well. Many of the students prayed for Mrs. Smith’s eternal spirit including Isla. I had heard the name mentioned more than a few times in her nighttime prayers.

For Bree, it was visiting the grave of her brother. If he had been born, her whole life would’ve been different. She could’ve bossed him around and teased him endlessly because it was an older sibling's prerogative to torture their younger sibling. They would’ve been close to ten months apart in age. The death hit Bree hard, and she didn’t talk for about a week afterwards. Before then she had never thought about her brother being an actual person. He was abstract, but a friend of hers mother gave birth to a baby boy at the time. She became keenly aware of her own loss she hadn’t known she suffered. Her friend gushed over how cute her brother was and how she couldn’t wait until he was big enough to play with. Bree cried into my chest as I held her in my bed. We fell asleep holding one another. She was envious for some time and refused for ages to visit her friend because of her new brother.

“The funeral is actually Isla’s earliest memory.” I informed him and watched the pain settle over him. I didn’t relish in it. There was a point where I would’ve. I lowered my gaze apologetically. “She told me about two years ago the first thing she could remember was being in a black dress at a cemetery. She remembered the tiny coffin. She doesn’t know the specifics or anything of that nature. I had to deal with her nightmares for months afterwards.” Flashes of screaming and sleepless nights invaded my memory.

Those were the nights where she shared my bed despite being nine years old. Her arms wrapped tightly around my torso as she drifted off to sleep. My own kept her close to my heart. I would awaken to find both girls in bed with me, not that I minded. I enjoyed the closeness we shared because I understood the gifts they truly were to me. While Gabriel was taken, God still gave me two perfectly healthy children who were my entire life.

I hadn’t shared the information with Jamie. In a way, it was too intimate. There were topics we strayed away from to keep the peace and space between us. While I was comfortable broaching almost any subject related to the girls, I couldn’t talk about Gabriel. The scars ran too deep. I sometimes thought if I had been able to have a conversation about our mutual loss, our marriage could’ve survived.

His absence was still a wound on my soul. There wasn’t a day that passed where I didn’t think of him at least once.

“I thought about visiting.” I snapped my gaze to him. I tried to hide my shock at his statement. “I couldn’t bring myself to come. I have many regrets about what happened.”

“It was hard the first time I made it out to the cemetery after. It was actually months before I could visit.” I swallowed. “I went by myself. It was around Christmas. I cried more than I care to admit. I had flowers for him.” I remembered the flowers on multiple graves and watching others come to visit their loved ones. “I sat there for hours before I started talking to him. I told him about his sisters. It was cathartic, and perhaps the first step in the healing process for me.”

He was silent as he contemplated my words. “I saw a therapist.” He admitted somewhat embarrassed.

“So did I,” I offered. “I wasn’t coping well.”
We were both quiet. He reached over and held my hand in his as we prayed. I imagined we prayed for similar things, our son, our daughters, and ourselves.

We were by no means fixed, but there was a lightness in my heart at having shared one of the hardest moments of my life with him.

“Thank ye for telling me Claire,” he smiled sadly.

Chapter End Notes

We’ll get more into specifics of the affects of the miscarriage on their marriage later on in the story.
CPOV

I took a cleansing breath as I thought about all the decisions leading to the moment where I sat outside my daughter’s hospital room choking back tears. I suppose no matter the path I chose, it would’ve always led to the moment where Jamie entered my life.

While I certainly put more stock in logic and science before concepts such as fate and destiny, I came to the conclusion a long time ago, most things are inevitable.

Perhaps it was chance that resulted in Jamie sitting across from me on a train one day, but I like to believe there’s a greater plan involved. God provides free will, but ultimately he has a plan for us.

I was supposed to be on the train to meet him, and while there were all sorts of paths laid out before us, we were meant to be together. Now, I’m not sure whether or not I believe in alternate universes where our choices define what occurs next, I sometimes enjoy imagining whether or not different decisions would’ve resulted in us still being together.

I can’t know anything for sure, and I wouldn’t try to quantify it either. That sort of thinking belongs to a Claire of a different time. Once upon a time, there wasn’t a moment where I didn’t imagine Jamie filling every crevice of my life and always in my life.

What existed between us in the present wasn’t something I had the words to name. We were once two people too broken to heal each other from our joint loss, maybe a bit selfish as well.

My therapist helped a lot in shifting my thinking. Mourning was a personal experience and often many couples rarely survived after losing a child. It didn’t say anything negative about us, only that the way we could cope was apart. It took me a longtime to recognize I needed help.

Sarah was lovely and compassionate. For our first few sessions, she merely listened to me. She asked questions intermittently about my family and Jamie. She never judged me. When I was more comfortable with her, she began to help me dig deep.

I had a massive amount of resentment aimed at Jamie. It was the result of months of frustration and annoyance mixed with grief and heartbreak. She helped me to understand how in some ways I was unfair towards him. My true anger was redirected because I was angry with myself for losing our child.

I cried in her office for quite a bit.

“Claire, you’ve talked about the state of your relationship in the months leading up to your miscarriage. You said there was less intimacy between you, he was constantly working, and how frustrated you were dealing with both school, raising two children under the age of five, and gestating. The lack of intimacy and his close working situation with another woman along with pregnancy hormones resulted in him being an easy target for you.”

I nodded in resignation. She was reading me perfectly. “It isn’t awful and you’re not horrible. You wouldn’t even be the first person to ever feel such a way. His absence when you needed him caused you to redirect your feelings. He was the one never around, he left for another woman,” she shot me a look to prevent an interruption. “He didn’t have to directly deal with the loss only the aftermath. You were the one rushed to the hospital where you delivered a dead baby. Tell me about holding your dead baby.”
Tears clung to my lashes at her words. I was taken back to the hospital room where the nurse brought in a small baby wrapped in blankets. His eyes were closed because they never opened. His skin was cold. There was no flush to his cheeks. He simply appeared to be sleeping, and I wished so much it were true. “I remember his weight in my arms. I tried to imagine what it would feel like if he had managed a few more months inside. I didn’t want to cry and mar the only opportunity I would ever have to hold him. I wanted to savor our time because we wouldn’t get anymore.” I choked back a sob. “One tear fell and soon more followed. I banned Jamie from visiting me. I felt undeniable rage inside of me when I woke up and heard him sleeping. I guess I denied him the chance to hold his child.”

A feeling of deep remorse washed over me at the thought of depriving a man who loved as wholly as Jamie.

“I prayed to God.” I let out a harsh laugh. “I hate him too.” At that particular point, I had yet to go back to church. I couldn’t take communion because I refused to enter confession and admit my hatred and disappointment.

“Who are you really angry at?” I froze at the directness of her question.

Everyone in my life was content to move on from what happened. My mother rang regularly, but she never mentioned it. Tom called infrequently, but he still skipped over the miscarriage. The girls were quite young, and besides their father’s absence not much changed in their lives. Things went on fairly the same aside from their recent move following my graduation from medical school.

I turned my head away to avoid her knowing gaze. I became quite predictable in my avoidance tactics. Sarah was adept and aware enough to know when pushing me would get us somewhere productive.

She sighed and slid her pad to the side. “Why are you here Claire?” Her face was the picture of seriousness.

“To deal with the past in a way that does inhibit me. I’ve been walking around in a haze for months. On the outside I appear the same as always, but on the side I’m in such a turmoil. I want to be at a point where I can cope with my personal tragedy without crumbling. It’s difficult because some days I wake and I’m perfectly fine. Others, I fight with myself to crawl out from my sheets. I try not to cringe when holding my children, and I don’t want to feel that way towards them.”

She nodded satisfied somewhat. “What are your other reasons.”

I brushed away tears. “I don’t want to blame Jamie anymore. He doesn’t deserve my scorn and hatred, especially because I drove him away.” It was a hard admittance. I was self-aware enough to know my actions preceding and following May 2009 contributed to the dissolution of my marriage. “It’s tiring to continue resenting a man three thousand miles away. He has his own crosses to bear.”

“I’m proud of you for being honest.”

“That stung.”

“It was supposed to Claire, a few weeks ago you would’ve never revealed that to me.” Her assessment was a bit hard to accept only because of the accuracy. “Therapy is a place where you learn to be honest. I don’t necessarily require you to be truthful to me, but I need you to be honest to yourself. You do a great disservice if you can’t speak the truth.”
I exhaled slowly before glancing back up with glistening eyes. “When I held Gabriel, I cursed the world for being so awful. I hated everybody. The nurses were sympathetic and expressed their condolences. My ob/gyn was grim faced and apologetic, and I couldn’t talk to her anymore. I saw how perfect he would’ve been. I couldn’t help but picture his life. He would’ve had dark hair, his father’s eyes and smile, and his sisters would’ve loved him more than anything. As a stared down at my still baby, my heart cracked. I felt as if it were my fault and I had done something to not deserve him.”

I buried my face in my hands and cried.

It was well over a year before our sessions became infrequent to the point where I visited her office maybe twice a year. We kept in contact through email and I sent pictures of the girls.

Bree exited her sister’s room, probably from boredom. Isla was on heavy painkillers following her emergency surgery. She wasn’t in a state to be around visitors, and Bree was suffering. She hadn’t seen anything outside of the hospital in days aside from her father’s home or my hotel room.

“Mommy?” I hummed in response. “Can we go somewhere?”

I thought about her question. There was likely not to be a change in Isla’s condition, and I didn’t want to neglect Bree. “You know what Bree, let’s get out of here.”

She perked up instantly. “Are you serious? We can really leave.” I felt horrible it had come as such a shock to her.

“Yes,” I kissed her curly head. “Let me tell your father.” She nodded eagerly in anticipation.

I pushed myself out of the chair and stretched my tight limbs. I hadn’t been able to sit in a room with Jamie following our conversation in the chapel. It was revealing and open, and I wasn’t ready for that sort of directness between us. I’m not sure I ever would be.

Jamie worked on paperwork diligently. I admired his strong profile, especially with his apparently new glasses. He appeared quite distinguished and more handsome. His head popped up at my entrance. “Everything okay Claire?”

I nodded shyly. “Yes, uh Bree and I are going to go out. She’s feeling cooped up and it’s been sometime since I enjoyed Scotland. I figured Isla wouldn’t notice if we were gone.”

He removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes tiredly. “Did ye anywhere specific you were taking her?”

“I thought we might do some shopping.” I shrugged helplessly. The girls were growing like weeds. “Did you need anything while we were out?”

He shook his head. “If ye like, yer welcome to use my car. I’m staying here with Isla, so you might as well.” He offered his keys to me.

I accepted them in surprise, which he noted. “I figured we might take a trip over to Princes or George street, perhaps both depending on how Bree is feeling.” He nodded. “If you need anything, I’ll have my phone. Well I’ll see you later.” I sent a small smile his way.

I wasn’t fully comfortable in his presence. We cleared the air of some things, but there was still a huge wall between us.

As we headed to the car park, Bree grabbed my hand. “Mommy, do you remember to not drive on our side?”
I nudged her a little for teasing. “You’re forgetting I’m from this part of the world. Until I was in my twenties, it was perfectly normal to drive on the other side.” It was more than strange to adjust to the position of the steering wheel and to get used to driving over here again.

Back home in Boston, people were quite adequate at expressing their sentiments regarding the driving abilities of others. I had gotten into the habit myself of using some unsavory language. It seemed to be the only thing they understood.

We ended up on Princes Street. Bree was in complete awe of the ancient castle. “It’s so pretty. We don’t have anything like it at home.” I chuckled at her excitement.

“Oh love, castles aren’t uncommon over here. I spent several years going on field trips to castles growing up in England. It’s actually quite dull.” I informed her. “Although Buckingham Palace was nice when I was a kid, but really I just wanted to meet the Queen or Princess Diana.” Life in England seemed like an entire lifetime ago. I wasn’t the same dreamy eyed girl I was when I left.

She was silent and pensive. Her face scrunched up adorably. “Do you miss living in London?”

I considered her question, only because of how seriously she asked. “No I don’t. I love living in Boston with you and Isla. Everything is different, and while there are things I certainly miss about England, I wouldn’t trade our life for anything.” She squeezed my hand tightly, and I knew she felt much the same.

We managed to find a few outfits for her. I didn’t buy anything for Isla because it was Bree’s time. She needed to feel normal if only for a few hours. “What was it like growing up in England?” She was more than a little curious today. I actually loved it. The girls had never been to England before as Tom visited us, and my mother lived with us.

“Well,” I said as we were seated. “It was quite lovely. I grew up London as you know, and it was amazing. We took the Tube to get most places, although sometimes we got a cab. It’s not always smart to do so, but if you’re in a hurry, it’ll do. The fridges aren’t as big so we went to the grocery a bit more regularly. I enjoyed my childhood. I had several close friends, but we’ve drifted apart over the years.”

Bree stared at me curiously. “Is it weird I can’t imagine you having any other friends besides the ones you have?”

I giggled into my water. “Actually it’s perfectly reasonable. Joe is my best friend now, and most of my friends I’ve met through the hospital or church. It’s strange in a way to think about my old friends.” We took a few minutes to browse our menus before deciding. I ordered a few tacos and Bree a burrito bowl. Her and her sister ordered far too many times from Chipotle.

“What did you do for fun?”

“We did normal things. We played outside, or watched movies. It’s not much different. I went to a couple of music festivals. Sometimes I traveled and visited my Uncle Lamb.”

“That’s boring.” She laughed. “I guess it’s not that different. Do you think we could go visit London sometime?” It never occurred to me I was depriving my daughters of a piece of me. “It’s just well we’ve seen where dad grew up.” She played with the edges of her napkin.

I sighed sadly. “I’m sorry if it felt as if I were hiding a part of myself. Sometimes it makes me a little sad to think about my old home. There’s a lot of memories.” She nodded understandingly. “I met your father on the train back to London, and from there we became friends at first. Also I guess I feel a lot less English now.”
She scrunched up her face in confusion at my admittance. “I don’t get it.” Her eyes squinted curiously.

“Well my accent used to be a lot different, but it’s changed after living in America for so long. You kind of lose your ties to places after such a lengthy time away. I haven’t lived in this part of the world in over twelve years.” Goodness, sometimes it felt as if more time had passed. “I’ve become a citizen as you know, and while I still retain my English citizenship, it’s different.”

“I guess,” she shrugged, digging into her food. “Do you ever want to call your friends?”

I thought about my friends I left behind. Most of our correspondence was through Christmas cards and scattered letters. They attended my wedding to Jamie, and were some of the first to know about my first pregnancy. “I suppose, but I sort of feel terrible for not keeping up as much with them. I’ve known many of them since reception and others since primary school, and then I moved.”

It was sort of a depressing topic on which we landed. “Well I think they would forgive you. I mean you’re a doctor and busy like all the time.” It was wise words coming from a nine year old. “Besides real friends always forgive you even if you’re wrong.”

Bree learned that particular lesson the hard way during her time in third grade. The girls in her class had gone through quite a bit of drama. Parents were called in and the entire situation was quite the mess. Bree and her friends learned about forgiveness and accepting that you might not always be right.

“Are you done?” I asked her. She had really dug into her food, and I loved seeing her eat again.

She nodded. “Yes, I’m full.” A smile graced her lips, and my breath caught for a moment. “Thanks mommy, I don’t think I could’ve been in the hospital for much longer without going bananas.” Her childish giggles were music to my ears.

I paid and we headed back to the hospital. “You know Bree there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you?”

“Can we get a dog?”

I fixed her with a look. “Nice try, but you guys can’t even keep your rooms clean.” She grinned anyways.
I stared at her as we ate dinner in the cafeteria. My mouth was dry and my throat seemed a bit closed off every time I attempted to foster conversation with her. I wasn’t sure how to address the elephant in the room.

Many of the issues we had in the past were a direct result and consequence of our inability to properly verbalize our issues. We lacked communication as time went on, and eventually we began to blame one another for our lot in life. It was actually quite terrible because there wasn’t anything terrible about the life we built together.

With a huff, she set down her spoon and fixed me with a piercing glare. “Jamie, just say whatever it is on your mind. I can’t handle constantly feeling your eyes on me as I’m eating. It’s giving me anxiety, and I don’t have my meds on me.”

I quirked a brow at this particular revelation. The anxiety must be a far more recent revelation. As we spent more time together over the last week, I say more layers and dimensions to woman I formerly called my wife.

In many ways, she was the same person, but there were edges to her now. She wasn’t as emotionally open with me, which I supposed related to us not seeing each other once since the divorce. I cleared my throat and shifted uncomfortably under her dark gaze.

“Allright,” I held my hands up innocently. “I guess I’ve been wanting to talk more about the past. There’s still a tension surrounding us, and the girls are picking up on it.”

Her face fell sadly. I saw the contemplation written in her eyes, and I felt for her. It was never her intention to be here. She was supposed to be working back in Boston in the life she made for herself after ours fell apart. There were lines around her eyes that weren’t there before, and the laugh lines around her mouth were deeper. All sorts of stories behind each one that I didn’t know about. No amount of story telling would allow me to be in those moments.

I watched as she composed herself and brushed a few stray tears away. “What do you want to talk about specifically? Her face the picture of stoicism.

I swallowed back the bile threatening to come up. “Was it really about my work partner?”

A choked laugh escaped her, and I watch the surprise dawn on her face. I must have caught her off guard with that particular starter question. “Partly,” she admits, refusing to meet my eyes. “When I went to therapy, I ended up on anti-depressants.”

My eyes widened, but I tried to adapt a neutral expression. Claire didn’t always appreciate a show of expression. She found it uncomfortable.

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and I fought her on the medication. I guess doctors really do make the worst patients.” She sighed. My lips twitched a bit because she was a terrible patient. “I wasn’t just unhappy with you. My hormones were out of control, especially because of how quickly I became pregnant again after Bree. It was already difficult with an over-active toddler and an infant.”

She anxiously ran her fingers over the rim of her bowl as she measured her words carefully. Claire preferred to face a situation directly instead of beating around the bush. “I was perhaps a bit jealous of Britney. She did make it clear she wanted you by the way. It wasn’t as if I was completely mad.”

“I believe ye,” I told her earnestly. Britney made some advances, but I was firm in my rejection of her. I’m not sure if she fully understood as she didn’t stop, but towards the end I appreciated her affections. Afterwards when I had time for some self-reflection, guilt overwhelmed me. The shame I felt when I thought about my soon to be ex-wife and my two kids at home was massive. “You were right about her. She expressed her desire to be with me and made some advances.”

Her lips thinned considerably and her eyes burned with jealousy. It wasn’t an emotion I thought I would invoke in her again, yet here we are. “I see,” she bit out.

I can’t tell if she’s upset with me or Britney, or the both of us.

Her eyes were looking upward, and her mouth appears to be counting. “I want ye to ken I dinna return her feelings.”

Irritation flashed through her dark orbs and I forced myself not to recoil in fear. “Did you return her affections or ever lead her on in any way?”

I avoided her gaze guiltily because I hated to admit my own weakness. “Yes, but then no. I told her I was going through too much in my personal life to start anything with her. I wasn’t over you, and I couldn’t use my frustration with you as a justification.”

Her head bobbed as she absorbed the full impact of my words. Her hands tightened around her cup of water as everything settled over her until her shoulders slumped resigned.

It was interesting to observe this version of her. She wasn’t as reactive as she was in the past, and perhaps it was the maturity that came with embracing adulthood and parenthood. She’d been raising two children with some assistance, but she was the full provider. I was well aware she refused to accept my child support, and put the money into an account for the girls. She was proud, but self-aware enough to know when she required help.

She was such a multi-faceted person. I enjoyed all these contradictions in her character. It was almost as if I was seeing her for the first time ever, and perhaps I was.

“I don’t blame you.” She finally said after a few minutes of silence stretched between us.

My brows crinkled and I squinted at her with obvious bewilderment in my eyes. She couldn’t have said what she did.

A fond smile appeared on her lips. “Believe it or not I’m not as unreasonable as I was at twenty-six.” A tiny giggle left her. The guarded expression disappeared from her eyes, and a twinkle took its place. “It’s not as if I can get jealous now. I have no attachment to you besides co-parent.”

It hurt to think it was the only thing connecting us together in the present. We shared children, but it was all our relationship was.

“If I had known then, well things might’ve ended up badly. I probably would’ve confront her and
called her some horrible shit in front of the entire office.” I had no doubts about what she would’ve done. “At least I now have confirmation was at least in part a slag. I can’t quite call her a home wrecker. Is there anything else?”

Before I have a chance to censor myself, the words leave my mouth as if knowing I need to know the answer. “Why didn’t you stop me?”

“Would you think less of me if I said I hoped you would come back?”

I sat back in my chair as I openly stared at her small figure. She was of average build, but it was her larger than life personality that made her seem taller. She had a way of taking command of a situation, but the years changed her. I saw bits of her personality, but it was different.

Her long fingers rubbed her temples tiredly. “I thought you would call my bluff.” She admitted, the pain etched onto her face. “I never imagined the involvement of lawyers and getting an annulment from the Church.” Her face colored with a long ago embarrassment.

Save me, I'm lost
Oh lord, I've been waiting for you
I'll pay any cost
Save me from being confused
Show me what I'm looking for
Show me what I'm looking for, oh lord

Claire at times believed more strongly than I did. After Gabriel’s death she refused to step foot in a church. She stopped attending confession, and refused to consider the idea of turning to God in her time of mourning. The idea was abhorrent to her. Then when we had to go through the church to approve our separation, I knew it was to her upmost mortification. She was Catholic, pure and simple, and divorce was frowned upon generally speaking.

My hand scrubbed at my face as I processed her words. “I thought you couldn’t stand the sight of me. Actually I think your words were somewhere close to you hating seeing my face and hating me. You blamed me.” I ignored the tears that escaped my eyes.

“I blamed you because it was easier than blaming myself. I saw the relief in your eyes when you realized there wasn’t going to be another child.”

My movements froze at her cold words. Her face was devoid of any emotion, and the whiskey colored orbs I came to know were darker than I’d seen them. She believed I didn’t want our child.

“Claire,” I attempted to touch her hand, but she pulled back from me.

Her eyes dared me to try and touch her. “Don’t.” There was steel in her voice. “If you don’t recall you walked out when I told you I was pregnant in the first place.”

February 2009

Turning the key into the lock, I attempted to be as silent as possible. It was late and the girls were
more than likely sleeping. When I entered the apartment, I immediately heard the cries of a
colicky infant and Isla was covering her ears in the living room. Tears coated her red cheeks.

Claire paced up and down the hallway, gently bouncing the screaming Bree. I was amazed I
hadn’t heard it from outside. Isla glanced nervously at me and motioned me closer. “Baby
crying.” She informed me.

“Did she just start?” Isla nodded tiredly. Her fists rubbed at her eyes and a huge yawn overcame
her.

It was amazing how big she had gotten. She would be turning three later this year, and I
constantly found myself marveling at her growth. I remembered the day they put her in my arms.
She was a squabbling, red faced infant angry at being kicked out of her mother.

Her eyes remained mostly shut for the first few hours until I heard Claire gasp as she fed her. She
had the slant of the Fraser and the blue of the McKenzie’s. I knew babies eyes could change, but
secretly I hoped they would stay the same. Strawberry blonde fuzz covered her head, but the rest
of her features were too tiny to pick out.

I saw some of Claire in her lips, and I hoped she would have her nose as well. I needn’t have
worried about because aside from the eyes and hair, she was a miniature version of her mother.
She had the same freckles across the bridge of her nose and around her eyes.

“Come here,” I opened up my arms and she crawled into them. I held her and gently rocked her
as her eyelids slowly fluttered shut. Her perfect eyelashes rested on her chubby cheeks. It was
mesmerizing watching her sleep. Her perfect features were at rest.

Claire eventually settled Bree, and set her inside of her bassinet. She eased the door shut and
brought out the baby monitor.

Bree was a far more difficult baby than her sister. I loved her to pieces, but nights could be
particularly difficult when I needed to get up at five the next morning.

“There’s no need to be sorry about that,” Claire said as she gingerly sat on the sofa. There was a nervous energy in
the air, and I was immediately on alert. She had been strange and distant for the last week or so,
and at first I thought she was coming down with something. Being the primary caretaker for both
girls and attending school was running her down.

I wished she would sit closer. “It’s fine. I don’t think it is out of the ordinary for parents to come
home to upset children.” She shrugged and I could see the lack of sleep on her face. I felt like a
shite parent for being absent and allowing my wife to pick up all the slack. “Is something the
matter Claire?”

She was silent and contemplative. She chewed on her plump bottom lip nervously as she stared
at me. Her eyes took on a glassy sheen, and I was instantly worried about her. “Jamie… I don’t
how to tell you this.” I was apprehensive she was going to ask for a divorce or say she found
someone else. I wasn’t expecting the next words out of her mouth to be, “I’m pregnant.”

I gaped, slack jawed at her. My eyes widened in absolute astonishment before I pushed myself off
the couch and walked out the door. It wasn’t the best decision I could’ve made under the
circumstances, especially since my wife was hormonal and dealing with two kids and another on
the way.

I needed air though. My lungs constricted painfully as I sucked in a harsh breath in the bitter
winter air. I tried to focus on taking a breath at a time as I thought about the news she delivered
We just had Bree and now there was another one. I barely had time for the two we had. How was I to be there for a third one? Claire struggled enough to take care of Isla and Bree by herself, and while I was making great money, Boston was an expensive city. We couldn’t afford at the moment to move to a large apartment or afford a nanny to take care of the children when Claire was at school.

We were Catholic so abortion was out, not that I would ever ask her to get rid of a child we created. I pressed my palms into my eye sockets as I cried.

I never imagined all those years ago when we made our commitments to one another that this was where we would be. I didn’t know if I could do it.

By the time I made my way back home several hours later, Claire was in bed. She was firmly on her side and putting as much distance between us as possible. I didn’t ask her how she felt about the news. How did it happen? We tried to be careful, especially since she wasn’t back on birth control yet since she was breastfeeding Bree. There was already a deep sense of regret I carried at how I reacted to the news. Shame tumbled in my stomach as observed Claire's sleeping frame.

The pale light from the moon bathed her in a blue-ish glow, and illuminated the dried tear tracks on her face. I had done this to her. Worse than that I hadn’t realized, but I referred to her as Claire. I hadn’t used any sort of affectionate name for her since work picked up and the bairn was born. As I slept that night, I heard her cry and ignored the tense feeling in my gut that told me it was my fault and to fix it.

I turned away in shame because she was right. I hadn’t reacted properly when she dropped her big bomb. While neither of us were exactly thrilled with the timing, it was no reason for me leave her alone. We were both responsible for the life inside of her.

“I owe ye an apology.” She raised an eyebrow. “I wasn’t expecting you to tell me you were pregnant. We were already drowning, and the pregnancy only seemed to push us further apart instead of drawing us closer together.” This time when I reached over to grab her hand, she turned over her palm and my fingers tangled with hers.

\[\text{Don't let go} \]
I've wanted this far too long  
Mistakes become regrets  
I've learned to love abuse  
Please show me what I'm looking for

The softness of her hands always amazed me. It was fascinating how something so delicate could be strong enough to save lives. I forgot how well our hands seemed to fit together.

“I did want him, ye know.”

A solitary tear slid down her cheek. “I know.” She squeezed my hand to reaffirm her statement. “You felt his loss as much as I had. At the funeral, I focused entirely on you. I saw you arrive with Jenny, and you sat on the other side of the aisle. I don’t even remember crying during the funeral, but I remember with clarity the poem you read to sum our feelings about losing Gabriel.”

I studied the light blue veins in her wrist. I remembered receiving the news of her admittance to
the hospital, and thought about the possible absence of her life. Losing a child was difficult, but I wouldn’t have survived if she were gone to me as well. In the end though, I lost her too.

She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “I like this look of yours.” A nice rosy complexion bloomed on her face. “I didn’t imagine you ever going for the straight haired look.”

She ducked her head shyly. “Yes, well once I had money to see a hairstylist, I wanted something new. I rarely wear it curly anymore. I just don’t have the time to deal with it, and in the morning I can do a French twist or some other simple hairstyle without worrying about constant tangles.”

I sympathized with her. I used to watch as her face pinched with frustration at a particularly difficult knot in her hair. I honestly didn’t know how she did it. “You look more mature. It frames your face nicely.”

A soft smile appeared on her face. I noticed as the week passed less scowls and glares popped up, and I enjoyed the softer side of Claire. She was rarely harsh without reason.

“You should visit him.”

My grip tightened. “I don’t think I’m ready for that.” I admitted. The sorrow was still at the surface, and I couldn’t make a graveside appearance without falling to absolute pieces. “Just a little longer,” I told her and she nodded. “How did it feel your first time there?”

“As I told you, I went alone because I didn’t want to subject the girls to that so early. I was already distraught at the idea of seeing the headstone with his name. Aside from his death certificate, it was the only place his name ever would be.” I stroked away the cascade of tears. “I’ve taken them to visit him though. Bree and Isla in the beginning played some sort of game, and I sat there, caressing his name. I couldn’t afford to break down without scaring the girls. I could’ve left them at home, but I wanted them to be there. He was their brother. It was the only way they’d ever meet until the end of this life.”

I should’ve been there with her that first time. “It’s okay,” her thumb stroked the smooth skin on the back of my hand. “It’s hard to think about all the things he will miss out on and already has. It’s easier as the years go by, and I don’t find myself holding my breath anymore.” I knew what she meant. My throat closed up and my lungs constricted in those first months after we lost him.

“You’re so strong.” She shook her head embarrassed by my candor. “No you are. Some people let the darkness swallow them whole, but you didn’t. As I sit here with you now, I find myself impressed.” I meant it.

I brought our joint hands to my lips and pressed a gentle kiss. Her breath caught in her throat and there was a warning in her eyes for me not to push it. “Why didn’t we do this then?”

“Because we were stupid kids who threw away a good thing because they couldn’t recognize what they had.” I wondered if she already had the answer prepared, or if someone said something to her. “When I divorced you Jamie, I realized I also left my whole life in the UK. I don’t even talk with any of my old friends anymore. It felt too personal, and they all knew us as a couple. I feel like an arsehole for how I acted afterwards. They were trying to be supportive and I pushed them away.”

“I doubt they hold it against you. You were going through a rough time, and you were alone across the Atlantic with two American children.” I teased her, and it got me a tiny smile.

It never failed to amuse either of us how American our daughters were. It was a running joke between us when Isla began to talk. Claire hoped desperately for her to pick up the English
accent, but with play group and the nursery at church, it was a lost cause. Claire was completely resigned to raising American little girls. I honestly wouldn't want them any other way.

“I’ve visited when I’m in London, and they always ask after you. I never have anything to say aside from what the girls tell me, but I think overall they just want reassurance you’re okay. They do miss you.”

“I plan to initiate contact, and possibly pop into London one of these days.” I knew it was a huge step for her to consider possibly visiting her former home.

“I was going to take Bree to the beach tomorrow, would you mind joining us? Jenny wanted to bring the girls by to spend the day with Isla if that’s alright with you?”

I saw the hesitation and the immediate protest before she closed her lips and murmured a soft “yes.”

I knew how wary she was to spend any significant amount of time with me, but I didn’t want her cooped up in the hospital or her hotel room. She and Bree were there when they weren’t here. Bree rarely went back to my house unless her mother was staying overnight at the hospital. She latched onto her mother immediately, and I tamped down my jealousy at the closeness shared between them.

I couldn’t feel envious as I watched them play on the beach Yellowcaigs Beach in The Lothians. The cove was beautiful this time of year, and the view of the lighthouse on Fidra Island was spectacular. Although according to Bree, lighthouses were boring. There were plenty in Massachusetts.

The water was a clear blue as it lapped at the shore. I inhaled the salty sea air, and felt my body relax for what seemed like the first time in weeks. The waves come in and break white against the rocks, spraying water everywhere. Bree and Claire laughed as water splashed them and they chased each other.

There’s such a carefreeness about Claire that it surprised me to think about the emotionally distant woman who arrived. “Mommy,” Bree cackled as Claire caught her around the waist and tugging her.

Their interactions were pure and innocent, and I saw the love they bore for one another. There’s a look Claire has that’s expressly for our daughters. It’s hard to describe the serenity I feel when I see it. Her lips curve up, and the apples of her cheeks are revealed. Her eyes are bright and alive, and there’s a hint of mischievousness behind those orbs.

I can’t get a proper read on how she feels about me. Sometimes I almost felt as if it were love in her eyes, but then I convince myself it’s a trick of the light.

More laughter followed as they played together. Claire beckoned me over with such a lighthearted expression on her face. I run over to her and Bree who was completely soaked.

Bree looked as if she had never been happier in her entire life. Her ocean eyes sparkled in apparent delight as she threw herself into my arms. “Daddy save me from mommy.” She giggled merrily, and I realized what I was missing, my family.

Save me, I'm lost
Oh lord, I've been waiting for you
Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for being so wonderful. This chapter is definitely about progress and acceptance of the past. Obviously one conversation won't fix everything, but it's a true start. They're being honest about the past and their roles in the dissolution of their marriage. A divorce is on both spouses, and they're beginning to understand what they gave up.
I Like Me Better

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys for all of your kind words. I truly appreciate and treasure every comment you leave. Also, there's a nice surprise for all of you in this chapter. Hope you enjoy!

_Damn, I like me better when I'm with you_

I like me better when I'm with you
I knew from the first time, I'd stay for a long time 'cause
I like me better when
I like me better when I'm with you

I plopped down beside her on the blanket. She kept an eye on Bree as she played with another girl she met on the beach. It was strange to be here with the both of them like this because it had never happened before. We hadn’t taken a beach trip together since Isla was one.

By the time Bree was old enough, we were having too many issues. I knew that since then Claire took the girls to the beach every summer. Sometimes they went to Cape Cod or the Vineyard, but other times Claire became adventurous and took them down south to the Outer Banks. It was strange to note how Claire embraced the American lifestyle, but in a way it was very much her pace.

“I forgot how cold it could be even in the summer.” Her voice was soft as she shivered lightly, a result of the brisk sea air.

I enjoyed this side of her far more than the tentative, recalcitrant, quarrelsome side of her. It was nice to simply appreciate a moment without us aggressively at each other’s throats.

“I realized it’s the first time I’ve ever been to the beach with both you and Bree.”

Her lips tipped up, but it wasn’t a full smile. There was a hint of melancholy attached, and I understood it well. We’d deprived our children of shared moments with their parents together because we couldn’t get it right.

She leaned back onto her elbows. “The first time I took her, her eyes were dazzled by the water. I swear they were the exact same blue. It was such a deep color, almost like cobalt.” I closed my eyes and tried to picture it. “Isla was three and managed to get away from me. She headed straight towards the water. My friend Mel caught her before she got too far. They were both such water babies. The water was a bit cold, but it didn’t bother Bree at all. She laughed and splashed. She cried when we pulled her away, and stretched her arms out towards the water as if was beckoning her.”

A fond, nostalgic grin formed on her face. “Do ye have pictures?” Even if she didn’t currently have them on her person, I wanted to see them at some point.

She pulled out her phone. Her lock screen was a picture of the girls with Mickey and Minnie Mouse. She scrolled through the years, and my heart clenched as it physically and mentally hit me how many more pictures and time she’d had with the girls. It wasn’t her fault or anything, but it
pained me to have the evidence presented to me.

She handed the phone over when she found the right folder. Bree was so tiny even at one. Her eyes were focused in one direction, and I knew she heard the call of the sea. There were tiny freckles lining her nose. "We put a lot of sunblock on, but well the girls seemed to come home with more freckles." I wanted to touch hers, which weren’t covered by make-up.

In another picture, Bree and Isla were in the sand giggling about something lost to time. Their eyes crinkled and heads tipped back. Bree’s hair was bright red, while Isla’s was darkening to a deep red color. “They look so little.”

Claire nudged my shoulder playfully. “They were. Sometimes I remember when Isla climbed into my bed every morning and we cuddled. It’s hard to get her to do it now. She doesn’t like it when I treat her like a baby.” I sensed the dismay she felt at the fact the lasses were growing up. “Bree is tactile though. She still crawls into bed with me on mornings I’m home. On weekends when I’m off, we watch movies in bed and eat ice cream.”

I easily pictured the life they were living, and I wished desperately I was a part of it. “Yer house looks lovely. The girls have given me some brief tours through our calls.”

I knew she found a new place sometime during the divorce, but hadn’t moved in until after I was gone. She required a place closer to where she was doing her residency, and it was always the intention for us to find a bigger place for the girls to grow up. The apartment was meant for a couple starting out or college kids needing a cheap place.

“It was strange when we first moved in. My mum didn’t move until two-thousand and eleven, so I got some friends to assist in moving furniture. I actually donated most of ours and bought some new pieces.” Her eyes flickered in my direction before moving back to our daughter. “I couldn’t sleep in the bed we shared anymore.” I nodded as a heaviness settled over me. “I actually slept on the couch for a while, or snuck into Isla’s room.” I winced at the thought of her toddler limbs.

Isla was a mover in her sleep. We put her in the bed with us occasionally, and usually ended up with her above our heads or across our chests. One time she kicked me in my balls. It was excruciating. Claire took her out for the rest of that day as I iced my privates.

“We’ve been there ever since and my mother is actually moving out into her own apartment. The girls don’t know yet. My mum thought it was time, especially since she’s not needed as much around the house as in the beginning.” I was surprised when Claire first dropped the news her mother was leaving England to across the pond. Julia was a true Englishwoman and had never left her home for more than a few weeks. “She doesn’t want to move back to England, but I know she’s planning to spend a few months with Tom.”

“I heard he had a baby.”

Her eyes rolled in Bree’s direction. I knew she was aware of who dropped that particular bomb. “She meant well. She was excited to have a new cousin. She has all of Jenny’s kids, but it’s different when it’s her Uncle Tom’s. To be honest, I’m surprised he found a woman to settle down with.” I smirked at her appalled expression and bumped her shoulder with mine. “You know it’s true.”

“Yes I know,” she laughed easily. I can’t explain the difference in us lately, but something changed the other day after our discussion. “She’s good for him though, and he seems to love her. Mum travels frequently over there, although Tom is possibly going to be transferred to Australia for his work.”
It was hard to imagine the acne ridden, angsty teen Tom as an adult. He was almost a year younger than me and could be quite the smart arsed punk. He constantly teased Claire and I for our relationship. He was also the first to note when we lost our virginity to one another.

_I don't know what it is but I got that feeling (got that feeling)_
_Waking up in this bed next to you swear the room_
_Yeah, it got no ceiling_
_If we lay, let the day just pass us by_
_I might get to too much talking_
_I might have to tell you something_

August 2001

I took Claire back to my home again. Her and Jenny had become quite good friends, often ringing each other, infringing upon my already precious time with her. I swore my sister was doing it on purpose.

My Sassenach and I made the trek up to our spot where we could see the Broch and all of the rolling hills of the highlands. “It’s peaceful,” she hummed as I settled behind her.

She leaned back into my chest as my arms wrapped around her middle. Her head turned and the light captured her just right. She was truly radiant. Her hair shone with streaks of auburn and her eyes were dangerously dark. She pulled her lip into her mouth, and my eyes traced the action.

I gently tugged it out before taking her lips with my own. My tongue brushed against her lips and she opened up her mouth to give me access. I explored the depths of her sweet mouth and took all she had to offer. Her eyes fluttered close the moment we made contact with each other.

I never tired of seeing her reaction to my ministrations. We had yet to have sex. Her head tilted as she pressed her lips harder to mine. I gasped at the change in pressure and my hands settled on her hips. My forehead rested against her as we tried to steady our breathing. “Wow,” I grinned feeling immensely proud at her disheveled appearance. My hands worked themselves into her hair. The curls were a wild mess, but she never looked more beautiful to me.

When I kissed her I saw possibilities. I saw picnics in the park, gazing at the stars, white dresses and tuxedos, and red haired children. I saw the future all wrapped up in her.

Then she stared at me peculiarly. It was a look I had never seen from her before, but I would see quite often in the future. “Jamie,” her voice was a soft whisper. “I want you to make love to me.”

My eyes nearly popped out of my head in surprise. It must’ve shown on my face because she placed my hand on her breast. “I want you, right here. This is the place where I saw a future with you for the first time. I want you to make me yours.” I raked my eyes down her body and hesitated.

I didn’t want us to make any rash decisions. She was possibly reacting from the heat of the moment instead of rationally, and I didn’t want her to regret the loss of her virginity. “Are ye sure Claire?” There were moments where her name was required.

We were having a serious one. I needed assurance that what was about to happen was what she desired. I had no intention of ever taking advantage of her. She nodded her head. Her dark stare quite piercing in the fading sun. I laid her down on the blanket and kissed her.

It was going to happen. We were finally going to claim one another in a moment that would change the entire dynamic between. Neither of us required sex as the ultimate assurance of
intimacy. We were close without it, but this step was a huge undertaking for us. It was a pledge, a promise between the two of us that what we had was real.

I peeled the shirt off her body and openly gaped at the midnight blue bra and how it contrasted nicely with her fair skin. Her collarbone was littered with tiny freckles, and I peppered kisses across it. Her moans were music to my ears. Her hands were in my hair, pressing my face further into her skin. “Like that,” she groaned.

I eventually moved my attention to her breasts. They were actually perfect and fit just right into my hands. I reached behind her to remove the clasp and slid the bra from her body. Her nipples were a dark rose color and puckered by her arousal. I had never seen them before as I kept my touching respectful during our make-out sessions. My hands never went under the shirt, no matter how much she begged otherwise.

My hands slowly and gently covered her breasts. I squeezed, testing the pressure. Her eyes were shut, but I knew she enjoyed it. I lowered my mouth to capture a hardened nipple between my lips before fully latching on, lathering attention to the breast with my tongue.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and called out my name as I divided my attention between her breasts. I wasn’t ignorant or naïve enough to believe I could get her to orgasm that way. I talked with my friends about how to pleasure a woman. I was extremely nervous, but Claire somehow had a way of making it all better. She eased my anxiety about the whole situation.

Her body arched against my mouth as tiny pants left her mouth. Her pelvis gyrated against my abdomen and breathy sighs escaped her as she cried out “oh God.” I was hard, but I wanted to make it perfect for her. I needed for it to be a memory she wouldn’t forget and not one where clumsiness was involved.

Her nails scratched against my scalp and her hips rotated beneath me. She required more now, and I was happy to oblige her. Her eyes opened and I saw my entire world in their depths. There was an intensity in those dark brown orbs. I was reminded of the earth and found myself rooted in the moment. I saw the warmth and I was like a moth to the flame. They glistened with mystery, but there was an overwhelming amount of love shining through.

I was taken aback for a second. We exchanged I love you all the time, yet it was the first time I saw how much she meant the words. Her breaths came hard and fast, and I found myself in disbelief that this was my Claire underneath me. A year passed since fate interfered and I sat down with a beautiful girl on a long train ride home. The same gorgeous girl fell into my lap before her stop and a lovely pink color stained her cheeks at her embarrassment. It was in that moment I knew I wanted to know everything about her.

I moved back to her lips and settled myself at the apex of her thighs. Aside from her lack of shirt and bra, we were still fully dressed. She wrenched her mouth away from mine and must’ve thought the same thing because she quickly divested me of my shirt.

Her mouth latched onto available skin and she sucked hard. I knew she was marking me. A part of me was pleased she felt possessive of my body.

My erection bulged painfully against my jeans, but I made no move to remove my pants. It was Claire once again who removed my jeans and observed how big I was just in my boxers. Her eyes were wide and I saw a bit of fear.

While there were rumors about Catholic girls and their illicit activities, Claire was perhaps one of the most innocent girls I knew. Further along in our relationship, we talked about things of a
sexual nature. She’d never even masturbated before because she felt guilt, good old fashioned Catholic guilt. It took several minutes and her steely glare before I stopped laughing at her. She didn’t appreciate my sense of humor.

She was on birth control, so that part was handled. She had female issues, and I left the explanation at that.

“We don’t have to do anything.” I told her as I planted tiny kisses on her neck. “I’m perfectly fine with what we have.” She shook her head immediately and slipped her jeans off. I gaped at the tiny panties she wore. They were the same blue color as her bra. I think I even gulped because we were actually going to do it.

My hand brushed against her thigh and moved closer to her sex. I felt the heat emanating and swallowed my moan.

I was going to be the first and hopefully the only person to know her so intimately. Slowly and carefully, I lowered her panties and they slid right off until she was revealed before me. She wasn’t overly hairy, but she kept things neat. Her eyes were nervous and I planted a kiss on her stomach to reassure her.

Soon enough my boxers were gone. There were no layers separating us. I sucked in a breath as I pitched into her. I couldn’t resist the warmth her body was offering. She was my siren, and her body was calling me to sea. I settled between the valley of her thighs. My erection nudged at her opening, but neither of us made a move.

“I love you,” I murmured to her. I wanted her to know. “I don’t think I shall ever love a woman like you. We may be young, but Claire you’re everything to me, Sorcha,” I breathed against the sensitive skin of her long neck. She shivered against me.

Our eyes locked and she grabbed me in her hand to guide me inside of her warm insides. Tears pooled in her eyes and her jaw clenched as I began to push inside. I paused as I saw a tear fall. “Are ye alright? Do ye want me to stop?” She shook her head and begged me to continue.

As I slid inside, I was almost done in by how hot and wet she was. I had never known pleasure like this, and my friends couldn’t adequately describe what it felt like to be with a woman. They hadn’t loved the girls they lost their virginity to which made all the difference. My experience was better because it was Claire, the woman I pictured the rest of my life with. I couldn’t imagine sharing it with anyone else except her. She was my salvation.

Her eyes were squeezed shut, but I continued to press forward. I knew the moment her maidenhood was gone as she shed a few tears. I kissed them away. Once I was fully sheathed inside of her, I stilled to allow her time to adjust to me. I didn’t want to cause her anymore pain.

I had a difficult time of it because it was my first sexual experience. Aside from my hand, my cock didn’t see any action.

Before that moment, I never noticed how small she was either. She was still a good seven or so inches shorter than me, but it never occurred to me. Her natural disposition made her seem larger than life. Also, her school uniform hid her figure and her regular clothes weren’t form fitting. She was generally insecure about her body, and my assurances didn’t really help. She claimed I was biased, which I was but I loved her body.

She was lithe with sinewy muscles, although from what I couldn’t say. She did yoga, but generally speaking she wasn’t athletic.
As I continued not to move, I tried to take in everything. I absorbed how her walls felt around me, how she clenched and how tight she was. She breathed deeply as her body attempted to relax at the intrusion.

I brushed my lips against her eyelids down to her lips where my tongue sank into her mouth and I enjoyed her tongue playing with mine.

The connection between us grew. I could almost sense what she was thinking and feeling. I tried not to get too excited about the fact I was actually inside of her. I wasn’t expecting anything more than some cuddling as the sun set, but Claire had a way of sometimes making things even better.

She pushed into me with her pelvis and her hips rocked frantically. “Please,” was all she said.

I knew it was time to move. I pulled almost all the way out before pushing back in slowly. I did this several times to help her adjust. My face ended up buried in her slender neck once again. I sucked the skin into my mouth and at one point I think I bit her. The rhythm was slowly and steady as the sun made its descent behind the hills. The light created a perfect effect, and I knew what was happening would be permanently etched into my memory. Her skin glowed beautifully and her eyes were brighter than I'd seen them. She was a goddess.

I lost myself in her. It was the feel, the smell, everything, all the tiny noises she made when I hit a particularly sensitive spot. When I thought about this moment since we started dating, I never imagined reality to be better than my dreams. Rarely in my experience did it happen.

I stared down at her and watched as she drew her pleasure from me. Her curls were spread out under her on the blanket. Her eyes fluttered and her rosebud lips parted in ecstasy. I knew whenever it did happen, it would be perfect because it was us.

She understood me in a way no human ever had. She was patient and attentive, and she loved every minute of the time we spent together. Even when we weren’t together, we were probably on the phone. I’d never connected with somebody on this level, and I wasn’t prepared for the emotions associated with this act. I knew then I would do anything for her as long as we lived. I wanted to make her happy. I would give anything to make sure she stayed happy.

Her lips sought my own and we continued to kiss as our bodies moved together in the most natural way. I wanted her to understand how serious it was for me to do this with her here. I was making a commitment to her, despite the fact we were seventeen years old and most people would claim our relationship wouldn’t last. I needed her to know this wasn’t just for now but forever. My life and hers were forever intertwined.

My movements sped up and she responded in kind. Her body met mine thrust for thrust. I slid my hand down to her bundle of nerves because I wanted her to come. She tightened around me and I almost came then.

She smiled languidly at me as if there was no one in existence but the two of us. I lost myself in her. She plunged her tongue into my mouth as my lips descended upon hers. Her legs wrapped themselves around my waist as my pace quickened. As I was about to hit my plateau, her thighs clenched around me and she yelped as her body tensed and shuddered. No longer able to hold back, I gripped her hips and pumped into her a few more times before I released inside of her.

My body fell on top of hers. My head rested on her soft mounds, and her fingers tangled in my curls. We simply lay there as we attempted to catch our breaths.

It was such a beautiful and tender moment shared between the two of us. I’ll never forget the content expression on her face or the flush when she noticed all of the love bites I left on her.
Although the pleased look on her face after she saw mine was more than enough for me to know how she felt about the marking thing.

When I returned Claire home, Tom was there with a smirk. “Oy Jamie, were you mauled by an animal?” The collar of my shirt didn’t do much to hide the hickeys. “It must’ve happened to you as well Claire.” His eyes sparkled with mirth at the situation. “Although you’re both glowing so it can’t have been that bad of attack.” He doesn’t miss a beat before he adds a follow up.

“So was it adagio or allegro?” He directed the question at Claire.

I was confused by the reference. Claire blushed and covered her face as her brother cackled. It was only later I understood he was using music terms from when they played the piano. He was asking if it was slow or fast.

The serenity I felt reminded me how much time passed. Tom had a family. We didn’t keep in contact after the divorce. He wasn’t angry at me; he sympathized with my position as he’d known his sister. After the funeral, he and I sat by the harbor and watched the ships come into port. We barely exchanged words. He seemed to instinctually understand what I required was silence to contemplate my next steps.

I never forgot what he told me.

“Jamie, Claire’s mourning, but he was your son too. You’re allowed to hurt and cry, to feel pain. I know my sister and she feels she has a monopoly on feelings, but she doesn’t.” His mouth was downturned. “If you don’t survive as a couple I won’t blame you.” He was hyperaware of the issues in my marriage, but he wasn’t throwing it in my face. He was offering acceptance and resignation, I didn’t comprehend then.

“It’s strange sometimes because I think of Tom as the annoying little brother he called us out after we had sex the first time.” The words fell from her lips so candidly. I was honestly astounded she brought it up. It didn’t fall under our safe topics of discussion.

I watched as the sunlight hit her and was reminded of her youthful innocence that night. Part of her was still that girl who lost her virginity outside in the Highlands. There were so many pieces of her, and I wasn’t positive if I ever had any.

Bree squealed loudly as ocean water sprayed her again. Her and her new friend Caitlin were enjoying the water and the ease of youthful friendship.

“Tell me a story Claire.” Her eyebrows shot up. “One the girls probably haven’t. They edit their stories so they don’t hurt my feelings, but I want to know these things. Ye ken?”

She was perhaps the only person who did. I was under no illusions the girls more than likely did the same for her. I adored how protective they were of us, but at the same time disappointed they didn’t want to share everything.

She pressed her body into the blanket until she was in a supine position. “Okay,” she licked her lips nervously. “When Bree was five, I finally took the girls to Disney World. We talked about doing it then because they’d both be old enough to appreciate it and not need someone to carry them around.” I tipped my head in acknowledgement, while trying to fight my burning jealousy. It was always the intention when Isla was five, but then Bree came along and we modified our plans.

“We stayed at one of the resorts. I can hardly remember now because we’ve made a few trips since then and the girls pick a different one each time. We took the ferry the first day, and I got to
watch as their faces lit up when we walked through the gates. They saw the castle and their mouths fell open. It was different than seeing it on television. Their heads turned in every direction until they dragged me into the Emporium. I purchased their first pair of ears.” She pulled out her phone and scrolled through her photo app.

I stared hungrily at the image of my daughters at Disney World for the first time in their lives. They were standing with the castle in the background. Bree was missing a few teeth and so was Isla. Their ears were firmly placed on their heads, arms were wrapped tightly around one another, and I saw the love they had and the excitement they held for their location. “They didn’t want the hats. They wanted something girly.” Her eyes crinkled in the corners as she laughed. “Somehow every time we’ve returned I buy them a new pair. They bring all of them so they can wear a different pair each day.” It wasn’t that surprising to anyone who knew our girls. “With Bree as tall as she is, we had no problems riding the rides in Magic Kingdom. We ate so much junk that day, but no one got sick. What made the experience for me was watching the reflection of the fireworks show in their eyes. They use the castle as well, and the girls were completely mesmerized by the whole display. Actually they still are and it never gets old watching it with them.”

Another photo showed two tired yet completely awake little girls. Their heads were close together as they stared up in utter amazement at the sky. I saw an explosion of color in their eyes and could almost picture what the moment looked like in person.

“They fell asleep tucked into my side and Isla had her head in my lap as we took the ferry back across the lake. A woman next to us found the scene to be adorable and took our picture.” Tears pierced my eyes as I saw the three most important people in my life in one photo.

Claire’s face was soft and motherly as she had an arm wrapped around Bree and the other in Isla’s hair. It was such a beautiful scene of her loving our daughters. I wanted to kiss her, but I held back knowing she wouldn’t be receptive to the idea at all.

Isla was relaxed in sleep, trusting her mother to protect her from the world. Her freckles were more apparent than usual against her sun kissed skin. I wasn’t aware she had the ability to tan. Bree had half her face buried in Claire’s breast with her mouth partially open. She still slept like that sometimes. “Thank ye,” I handed her back her phone.

“They love you. I know they’re probably different here, but they cherish this time. They start talking about their trip as early as February. By May, they’re begging for new wardrobes,” her eyes rolled upward. “On the last day of school, they’re hyper and jumping around. This year their departure actually fell on the last day, and they were so excited. Overall, they don’t mind missing out on some things happening back home.” Her hand inched over to cover mine. “You’re a good father. They know you love them.”

I glanced skyward as I tried to control the onslaught of emotions coursing through me. It was some sort of role reversal or something. “I regret not being there enough. I missed Bree’s first full sentence. I’ve never seen them play sports, except for the videos recorded. I don’t get to cheer them on like all the other dads.” She bobbed her head, a soft smile reserved for me.

“I don’t make it to every game either. You’re welcome in Boston whenever you like. You can visit at Christmas or Hogmanay if you’d like. Samhain can be a bit of a nightmare with two indecisive girls, but you could come then and take them out. It’s quite the experience when they’re able to stay awake for longer than an hour, and you’re the one tired by the end.” My lips quirked up at her woes. “It’s one of the most exhausting things I’ve ever done, and then I got called in to do a double shift because all of the morons seem to pick that night to do stupid shit.”

“I’m amazed how you balance work and motherhood. I mean being a surgeon is one of the
toughest jobs in the world but so is single motherhood. How do you do it?”

She blew a strand of hair of her eyes. “I’m not some saint and certainly not perfect. I make mistakes. The girls and I occasionally fight.” I tucked the loose strand behind her ear and she gazed at me gratefully. “I receive a lot of help from friends and my mother. Whenever I find myself getting upset with the girls, I take a breath and ask myself will it be important tomorrow? If I don’t find it to be I let it go.”

“As simple as that?” I questioned. I rarely had issues with the girls, but they were on their best behavior when here. To them, visits to me were a treat and so I received a different kind of treatment from them. Although there were times when their frustration with each other could no longer be contained.

She shrugged. “Not always, but I learned to pick my battles. It saves a lot of time in the long run.”

It was another one of those strange observations where I compared present Claire to the one of the past. She struggled to control her compulsive tendencies and little things aggrivated her. Here in front of me was this relaxed version who let the small stuff go. She tried not to get worked up and found coping mechanisms to help.

I opened my mouth to ask her another question when Bree tackled me in a hug. Her clothes were soaked all the way through. Luckily, we packed her an extra outfit, foreseeing the inevitable.

She placed her wet head on Claire’s stomach. The old Claire would’ve cursed at the coldness and the wetness, but instead her fingers ran through the knots of our daughter’s hair with a lazy smile. “How about some dinner and then we can go to the hospital to see your sister?”

Bree yawned tiredly as she snuggled into her mother with the rest of her body in my lap. “Sure,” she agreed. We’d already shared contact information with Bree’s new friend’s parents. “I’m really hungry.” She patted her tummy as it gurgled loudly. Claire laughed at her antics, her eyes filled with mirth. I don’t know what I imagined about her during the nine years, but for the second time in my life, reality was better than my dreams.

_Better when, I like me better when I'm with you_

_-I Like Me Better, Lauv_
Dreaming My Dreams With You

Chapter Summary

Something's gotta give.

Chapter Notes

I do want to make something clear after a reviewer left a comment the other week. Jamie didn't abandon his family. His marriage fell apart, and he needed somewhere to recover from the mess his life became. He was still there for his daughters despite the distance between them. Abandonment means to completely desert. The story is a slow burn and I'm a tease, so don't expect the ending to mean too much yet. Also, the chapters are going to be longer as compared to the beginning of the story so it might take a little longer sometimes to post. Enjoy!

I hope that I won't be that wrong anymore,
    And maybe I've learned this time.
I hope that I find what I'm reaching for,
    The way that it is in my mind.

We waited until we were closer to the city to stop for food. Bree’s eyes were wide and bright as we entered the family friendly pub. I wasn’t actually sure what sorts of places Jamie took the girls to when they visited with him over the summer.

They generally skipped over the food, especially after they informed me about how he took them out somewhere to try haggis. The girls did not respond positively to the dish and vehemently swore to never eat it again. We actually went to a pub I was familiar with Brewers Fayre for dinner.

It wasn’t some spectacular building or anything like that, but the food was decent and inexpensive. I tried to teach the girls the value of a dollar because I wanted them to fully appreciate what they have. We ate at expensive restaurants only for special occasions, also because it wasn’t really our style. I enjoyed living a comfortable, laid back lifestyle when I wasn’t at work where everything was high stressed.

Bree changed out of her swimsuit, t-shirt, and shorts into a white ruffled top and denim skirt overalls. I actually loved her outfit, and didn’t mind she refused my offer to help pick out clothes during the shopping trip.

She clutched Jamie’s hand as we waited to be seated. “Dad, did you know this is my first pub?” Bree was far more talkative and outspoken than her sister, and never hesitated speaking her mind. “Mommy isn’t big on eating out.” Her eyes were a pale blue now instead of the vibrant shade of the ocean.
“She wasn’t when we were together either.” He caught my eye and winked playfully.

I hid my smile at his forwardness. “Yes, well how will you get all of the important vitamins and minerals?”

An impish smile appeared on her lips. “I don’t think you really need them” All of her teeth were on display as her smile widened. “Besides mommy, it’s vi-tamins, not vit-amins.” I rolled my eyes at her correction. Ever since she discovered the difference between my pronunciation of words and hers, she began to correct my incorrect version. She shook her head sadly, her red braids swinging with her.

Jamie tugged on one of them to tease her. “Lass, ye need all of that if you want to be strong and tall when yer older.”

“I’m already tall,” she informed him, affronted by his insinuation she was anything but. “Besides I’m strong too. I’m the best kicker on my whole soccer team.” Bree was a proud creature. It wasn’t without merit she was one of the best players on her team, but I had to teach her a little about humility to prevent her from constantly bragging about how good she was.

“You can always be stronger and taller,” he told her as he tickled her side. She squealed loudly drawing the attention of some of the other patrons.

I ignored them and checked my emails. It was strange being around him like this. Prior to the dissolution of our marriage, we hadn’t had very many family outings after Bree was born. We were too busy and drowning in our own perceived failures.

We stopped taking the time to arrange something, anything together. Instead I spent the weekends in the library, buried under hundreds of books, while Jamie watched the girls. During the week, I was at home when I wasn’t in class. I couldn’t say the last time the four of us did anything, and besides when she was born, I don’t know when we spent time with Bree just the three of us.

I felt the stirrings of regret. It never fully occurred what we stole from our daughters when we threw away our marriage.

At the time, we were running on instinct and primarily thinking of ourselves, and not how our decisions would affect the rest of their lives or ours. In a way, I was glad for the events that led to the present. I would never actively wish for my children to be injured, but I wouldn’t have opened up to Jamie about the loss of our son.

We would never capture what we had in the past, but it was my fervent hope to rebuild the friendship we had in the past and to have a better co-parent relationship. I didn’t want him to feel as if he has to stay away to prevent us from reacting negatively in one another’s presence.

Bree’s blue gaze peered curiously at the menu, and I watched as her brow dipped in uncertainty. As soon as I caught the children’s options I knew what she would order, but I allowed her to pretend she was considering all of the meals offered.

My youngest was less open to trying new foods and I didn’t begrudge her. She was picky from the moment she tried solids at seven months. Vegetables were her favorites, but she despised fruits. She didn’t have much of a sweet tooth except on the rare occasion.

Her dentist was quite impressed with her brushing and the lack of decay. Isla on the other hand was exact opposite. She loved her junk feed, and while she brushed thoroughly had come away with a few cavities. It amazed me constantly to see the ways in which they complemented each other’s personalities. They were night and day.
Jamie watched her in amusement. I wondered if he was aware of what would choose. “So what are ye thinking of ordering Claire?”

“Fish and chips,” I answered succinctly. He knew good and well there was no other place in the world where I would eat fish and chips. It didn’t quite capture the same sort of feelings if I ate it anywhere other than the British Isles. “I haven’t had it in some time.” I perused the drink options, and thought about ordering an ale.

“Why do they call them chips instead of French fries?” Bree settled inquisitive gaze on Jamie.

He smiled bemusedly at her question. “Well, it’s believed French fries which are called frites in French originated in France. So the Americans and Canadians call them French fries.” I saw the adoration Bree had for her father, and how impressed she is with the wealth of information he kept stored in his brain. “We just call them chips.”

“I still think it’s weird. I mean chips are what you guys call crisps.” She wasn’t entirely impressed with his answer and it showed on her face. “So mom where are we going on vacation when I get home?”

Her non-sequitur question caught me off guard resulting in me staring at her blankly for fifteen seconds too long. I shook my head, hair falling loose from my clip. “Sorry, uh well I thought we would stay at my friend’s house on the Vineyard.” Apparently, it was the correct response because she squeals happily and begins to detail all the things she plans to do when we get there.

“Do ye go often?” Jamie asked me as Bree was in her own little chatter world.

I picked at my napkin. “Melody, a friend I made during my residency, she’s become quite a good friend actually. She helped me a lot after the divorce, and when summer rolled around invited me to her family’s summer house on the Vineyard. It took a lot of convincing on her part, but she wore me down.”

“Aunt Mel is good at that.” Bree chimed in. “Like when Isla and I stay with her, she’s good at getting us to go to bed. We are also good at getting her to take us to fun places.”

Melody couldn’t resist their sweet faces and ignored their deviousness. She allowed them to talk her into everything from trips to the zoo to laser tag. She rarely used the word no. “Anyways, we try to make the trip every summer. Sometimes we go for Memorial or Labor Day weekends. It depends on the year.”

His eyes were downcast, and I was terrified to ask what was wrong. I had an idea given our subject matter. For the both of us, we were realizing everything we were missing. The girls lived two lives. When they were with Jamie, they were someone else. They acted different and were a bit shyer. The time with him was precious and sacred because it was only a few weeks out of the fifty-two in a year.

I hated how little time they spent with him, but there was nothing for me in England anymore. I had a promising surgical career in Boston, and the girls had lives there as well. Everything they’d ever known was in America.

While I joked with my friends about them being Americans, I loved it. I couldn’t imagine them turning into Brits or Scots because it simply wasn’t who they were meant to be. I wish I knew a way where they could spend more time with Jamie, but three thousand miles was a formidable obstacle. It was hard to arrange with school, sports, and everything else. Money wasn’t an issue either as we had plenty of that to spend on plane tickets, but it was unbearable to watch my daughters board the plane.
“Sometimes we go on ski trips with Aunt Mel too. Although I like snowboarding better,” she aimed the comment at me with an impish smile.

I wasn’t in favor of her learning, but Mel and her wife managed to convince me to allow her to take a few lessons. Jamie’s head swiveled towards me with a strange look on his face. “What?” I asked defensively.

“Ye let the lass snowboard?”

I wasn’t sure about his tone, so I barely contained the venom in my voice. I was trying to remain amicable for Bree’s sake. She didn’t deserve two argumentative parents after basking in her solo day with us. “Yes, she takes lessons with an experienced instructor. She’s quite good too.” I stuck out my chin, daring him to question my authority as Bree's main parents. I would never allow the girls to participate in anything if I feared they would end up injured.

He backed down and his shoulders slumped sadly. He looked a bit pathetic and I sighed. “Winter sports are something New Englanders do, and I want to give the girls so many experiences. Isla prefers skiing. We’ve been going for five or six years now.” To him though, it was a recent development. It honestly made me wonder what the girls concealed about their lives at home. I never gave them the impression they couldn’t talk to their father about what we did across the Atlantic. I wanted them to share as much of their lives as possible.

Bree had a repentant expression as if understanding what her lack of information caused. I never wanted her to look like that again because it wasn’t her fault she was caught between two divorced parents. I settled my hand on her leg and gave it a tiny squeeze. “I’m sorry daddy we didn’t tell you about it. Sometimes we also just forget you know. When we call, we get excited to talk to you, but there’s so much always going on and we can’t tell you everything.” The sorrow on her face caused my heart to skip a beat.

“Hey Bree,” Jamie tipped her chin up. “Don’t ever feel guilty. I guess sometimes I forget how much time passes before I see ye again. I’m glad yer mam gives yer sister and yerself such amazing experiences.” His tone indicated he was the one with the guilt and I shared the sentiment. “Now tell me about snowboarding.”

The server brought out our food by the time Bree finished regaling her father with stories about snowboarding. She wiped out a few times when she first began and wanted to quit almost immediately. I held her to her promise though. We made a deal that if I paid for lessons, she had to complete them.

“This winter I get to do a lot more. My instructor wants me to move up to a different slope.” We were also going to purchase her first snowboard. “Mommy says I also get to pick out my own snowboard. She feels I’m responsible enough to take care of my equipment and cause renting can get expensive.”

Jamie wore a thoughtful expression and his eyes showed he was light years away.

Bree drifted off to sleep as soon as we were on the road. I knew it would happen because cars always lulled her to sleep. “I’m sorry about the thing. I really do forget the lasses have all these adventures when I’m not around.” I noticed his upturned palm and before I talked myself out of it, I slid my fingers through his. His hand was warm and familiar in my own. I enjoyed the rough feel of his palm against mine.

Someday I'll get over you.
I'll live to see it all through.
But I'll always miss,
If he was surprised, he didn’t show it. “I feel the same when they’re here. We don’t do anything out of the normal though. We take a few holidays, but most of the time we are running around from one activity to the next. Isla plays both field hockey and softball, and luckily has yet to pick up a winter sport. Bree plays football all year round. She plays both for her school and club, and club requires her to travel to tournaments. Club sports occur outside of school. It’s much more competitive than the school teams.”

I rarely had the opportunity to attend her tournaments. I hoarded my vacation days so I could take the girls places. My days off rarely coincided with her games. It was a relief to have my mother around, but sometimes Bree traveled with a friend’s family because we simply couldn’t manage to take her. I’ve made it to a few tournaments with a bit of luck and maneuvering, convincing coworkers to cover my shifts in exchange for taking over their midnight shifts. I wanted to support her as much as I possibly could.

“Is she good?”

I considered his question. I was perhaps biased because she was my child. “She is. She’s highly competitive and not the slightest bit humble. Sometimes she displays poor sportsmanship, but she’s gotten better as she’s aged. She congratulates the other teams on a well played game. Her team actually chose her as their MVP at their banquet.”

Bree cried when they announced whom all of her teammates voted for as the most valuable player. She was in a daze as she made her way to the front of the hall where she thanked all of her friends and coaches. She placed the trophy on the center of her shelf. It was the most important trophy in her possession because it was decided upon by her teammates.

Jamie’s lips turned up at the corners in a paternal smile. “How about Isla? Field hockey and softball aren’t the same at all.” I chuckled.

“Isla has a competitive nature as well, but she focuses more on strategy. She pitches for her school team. She used to play outside of school, but now practices run so late into the day, she stopped. As for field hockey, she picked it up in the sixth grade. She went to a few games because her school mentor was on the team. Then she decided she wanted to play. If you walked into my house, you would find sports equipment everywhere. The girls are terrible at putting their belongings away. Cleats rarely end up in the hall closet. Sports bags are dropped by the door.” I rolled my eyes at the girls’ messy natures.

I was constantly on them about picking up after themselves because I wasn’t their maid. I wanted them to learn how to take care of their things. “Luckily, we don’t have a yard or the girls would be leaving their things in the garden. If they want to practice, they go to the park a few blocks away, or to one of their friends’ houses.”

“Do they have a lot of friends?”

Did they ever? “Sometimes I think it’s too many. On any given weekend, I have ten to fifteen girls running through my house. Some of them are from the neighborhood, but most of them are from school. We attend the same church as well with most of them.” It took a while for us to depart from the church parking lot after mass because of socializing. “I’ve become quite good friends with their friends’ parents. It helps when my mum has other plans.”

He nodded and for the remainder of the drive was silently contemplative. I wanted to ask him about his thoughts, but I didn’t feel as if I had the right any longer. Ten years ago, I would’ve asked and there wouldn’t be any hesitation in his response.
When we pulled into the parking lot, I glanced back at Bree. Her head fell on her shoulder and her rosebud lips were slightly parted. “I’ve got her, ye can go check on Isla. I know you want to.” I smiled gratefully at him and made my escape.

“Auntie Claire!!” A brown haired blur nearly bowled me over with her enthusiasm.

I gently pulled back and was met with the sweet face of Maggie. I couldn’t help but stare at her because she had grown into such a lovely young woman. Her hair was still strawberry blonde, and it was longer than it had been in her youth. Then, she preferred short cuts as she traipsed after her older brother in the Highlands. Her mind solely focused on keeping up with all the boys in the village; she had no patience for cute hairstyles involving plaits and ribbons. Jenny tried a few times to corral her into a dress only to be met with complete failure.

“Look at you, you gorgeous girl,” I placed my hands on her shoulders and stared at her. I knew when she was born she would become such a beautiful girl with Jenny as her mother. “You’ve grown so much.” Jenny sent pictures of the kids, but it wasn’t the same as being there and seeing them in person. Maggie had grown so tall since I last saw her.

I’d known Maggie since she was born. I’d actually known all of them except for Ian since they were little babies. I was still in awe that Jenny gave birth when I was here. I was the only one with Jenny at the time and we had to rush to the local hospital. Ian made it just after the birth, and Jenny allowed me to hold her first. She was tiny then, and I could hardly believe it. I was honored to be the first official person to hold her warm body in my arms.

I was twenty at the time, and Jamie and I were quite a ways off from being married. “Wow Aunt Claire, I love yer hair.” She gushed happily as her fingers raked through my hair. Her blue eyes sparkled merrily and I was reminded of a rambunctious toddler hanging onto my every word and stuck to my leg. “Ye look so good.” Her gaze was appraising and proud. “Mam told me ye had a boyfriend?”

I flushed hotly under her knowing gaze. I was unaccustomed to this sort of directness from her. “Yes well we don’t need to discuss my personal life at this particular moment.” I kept my tone stern for her to understand my meaning.

Her pretty eyes rolled in her head much the same way Isla’s tended to do when she thought I was being dull. “Fine but I want to ken about him later.”

I smiled fondly at her and kissed her cheek.

“Aunt Claire, you’re actually here.” Kitty was the image of her mother. “Mam said you’d be here later, but we weren’t sure if we’d see you before we left. Ye ken since ye were out with Uncle Jamie.” She waggled her eyebrows, her sister flicked her head. Bickering broke out between the two of them.

“Don’t be an ignoramus.”

I covered my laughter with a cough. “The two of you will never stop arguing.” I shook my head at the familiarity. From the moment, Kitty started talking and a bit before that, the two girls rarely if ever got along. Their personalities were night and day. They barely agreed on any topic, and I assumed they were intentionally contradictory because they could be.

“Where’s Uncle Jamie?” Maggie peered over my shoulder as if her uncle would magically appear.

I smoothed her hair down. “He’s with Bree. She’s quite tired after a day at the beach, and fell asleep after dinner in the car.” The girls nodded in understanding. They had younger siblings.
“I’ve missed you two though.” I gently cupped their sweet faces and thought about time.

It was perhaps the most studied concept in the entire world, and yet as humans we barely scratched the surface of how it worked. Time ebbed and flowed and existed outside of our understanding. I’ve known the two young women before me since they were newborns, yet somehow time escaped me and they grew. They were well on their way to adulthood. The roundness of youth almost gone from their faces.

I recalled the sterility of the room. The walls were a standard white, the lights bright and fluorescent, and the smell of antiseptics. I heard the squeaks of soles on the linoleum floor as doctors, nurses, visitors, and other hospital staff traveled. The dull sound of the intercom echoed across my memory as Jenny squeezed her eyes shut.

“Oh Dia, Claire where’s Ian?” The pain radiated in her voice as sweat dripped down her face. I almost smelt the salt heavy in the air from her physical exertion.

Aside from a video in one of university courses, I’d never seen a woman give birth. I was slightly horrified by the scene displayed before me. The veins in Jenny’s hands were visibly as her hands tightly clutched the sides of her bed. Her toes clenched as each contraction passed. She was already nine centimeters dilated as labor came on quicker than with her pregnancy with Jamie.

I scooped out an ice chip and held it to her cracked, dry lips. Her eyes shown with heavy exhaustion and new lines appeared on her face. On the inside, I vibrated with anxiety. I wasn’t equipped to deal with my not quite sister-in-law in this condition. I tenderly offered my hand for her to grasp, hoping to provide some sort of comfort.

My hand spasmed painfully in her hold, but I kept silent. It was as if I were in a horror film as the birth progressed and the blood appeared. Despite studying medicine, I wasn’t mentally prepared for what happened next.

Jenny and the baby were in distress as the contractions became more intense. Something was wrong as her breathing quickened; the doctor ordered oxygen. They were going to deliver the baby via C-section as they suspected the cord was around her neck. Her heart rate slowed each time Jenny tried to push. “Jenny, we’re going to prep ye for surgery. We need ye to stop pushin’.”

Her frightened eyes met mine, and I swallowed nervously as I watched a line of sweat fall down her face. “I promise I’ll be right there with you Jenny.”

I can’t say what happened next as the world seemed to spin around me. It was quick and disorienting, and clarity only came the moment a baby cried out for the first time. I marveled at the slimy, mucus covered baby. She was covered in birth matter, but somehow I found her to be the most beautiful creature I’d seen in my life.

They held her up for Jenny and then placed the infant on her stomach as they prepared to take out the afterbirth. “Claire,” Jenny addressed me directly. Her eyes were clear and focused, quite surprisingly for a woman who just gave birth. “Would ye mind cuttin’ the cord?”

I gaped at her, my mouth popping open in an undignified and unattractive fashion. “Y-y-you really want me to?” I stuttered over my words, but I was in shock. She nodded her head and the doctors clamped the umbilical cord. A nurse showed me where to cut.

A few tears slid down my face as I cut the physical connection between Jenny and the baby. They took the newborn to clean her up.

She was returned with freshly cleaned pink skin and strawberry blonde curls. “I want ye to hold
her first because without ye, I would’ve been all alone. I want to make ye godmother, if that’s alright with ye?"

They placed the warm, solid weight of the baby in my arms and my heart melted. I promised her I would do anything to help make sure she lived a happy, healthy life. “You’re such a gorgeous girl,” I cooed softly to her. She mewed her agreement before her mouth began to root around. I knew what she wanted and carefully transferred her into her mother’s arms for her first feeding.

It was later when Jenny and Ian told me their daughter’s name was to be Margaret Claire because they couldn’t imagine naming their child after a better woman when I felt a rush of uncontrollable emotion. I recalled turning away to discreetly brush away some tears. I attributed it to my hormones going wild in the presence of a baby.

There was a shuffling noise behind me, and I spun on my heel to find Jamie behind me with a sleepy Bree in his arms. She made a snuffling sound against his neck and tucked her head in tighter. I knew the feeling he was experiencing as I’ve carried Bree myself while sleeping. Sometimes I still picked her up and relished in the contentment of her in my arms. She was almost too tall for me to continue doing it, but she was my baby.

“Uncle Jamie,” Maggie greeted happily, a warm smile on her face. “Did ye have a great day at the beach with Aunt Claire and Bree?” I detected something more than a simple inquiry in her tone.

Jamie glanced briefly at me before focusing his gaze on his niece. “Yes, it was enjoyable.” There was confusion on his face.

“We should wake up Bree, otherwise she’ll never go down tonight.” He nodded absently and began to rub her back to rouse her.

“Brianna,” he crooned to her in a soothing tone. His voice a low murmur as he helped our daughter transition into the land of consciousness. Bree pulled back with mussed hair, creases in her face from the car, and sleepy eyes.

She slowly slid down her father, and stumbled slightly as she tried to acquire her balance. I found her half sleep state to be one of the most adorable qualities about her. “Why don’t you pop in and say hello to your sister?” Her head nodded, although I wasn’t sure she heard what I said. I placed a kiss in her hair as she walked passed me.

Her cousins guided her into the room, leaving Jamie and I alone. A feeling of disconcertion came over me in his presence. The day was lovely and reminiscent of days long past. “How much did you hear?”

His eyes shifted to a point behind me as he pursed his lips. “I kent about yer boyfriend.” There was something peculiar in his voice, but I didn’t know what to make of it.

I’d driven myself mad over the years imagining him snogging his way through Edinburgh. Perhaps it was an over-exaggeration on my behalf as I tried to control my raging jealousy. I was more than aware it wasn’t his style to be a dog with two dicks. Mostly I went barmy because I was daft enough to allow him to leave in the first place. It wasn’t fair of me to hold onto the notion he should remain celibate. He was still quite young and had his looks about him. He deserved happiness.

“So can I be honest wit’ ye Claire?” I quirked a brow at him, nodding. “I’ve been back stateside a few times since our divorce.” My mouth was dry all of a sudden, and there was a vicious knot in my stomach. I felt the dredges of anxiety gnawing at my insides. When had he come back? Did he come back for me, or was it for the girls? The last thought was my guiltiest. Why didn't he say
anything to me?

He grabbed my hand with a furtive glance at Isla’s room before dragging me down to the family room. Luckily, there were no occupants currently in the room and he situated me in a seat, realizing I had yet to move past his last sentence.

“Explain.”

_But I won't let it change me,_
_Not if I can._
_I'd rather believe in love._
_And give it away as much as I can,_
_To those that I'm fondest of._

**JPOV**

I ran my hands nervously through my hair as she stared at me with those dark eyes of her. There were flecks of green, and I found myself in a forest. Her face was dangerous and tight. It wasn’t the time to wax poetic. She wanted answers about my activities in America.

_May 2012_

_I received the call around two in the morning from Julia about Isla’s admittance to the hospital. Claire was with her as they prepped her for surgery. She’d been pulled from her own surgery with the news her daughter was in the ER for abdominal pains._

_“Hello Jamie,” she said immediately. “Isla’s been admitted to the hospital. Her appendix is going to be removed.” She rushed out her sentence quickly to prevent me from panicking too much._

_My eyes widened, and I could hear the pounding of my heart in my ears. “Will the lass be alright? Are there risks with having her appendix removed?”_

_“She’ll be fine. As long as it hasn’t burst, there’s less chance for an infection. I’ve got Bree with me if you want to say hello.”_

_My lips turned up as soon as a little voice began to talk. Bree’s whimsical ramblings helped to center me and assisted me in collecting my thoughts. “I love ye my ruadh bhàn a ghalad.” She said something as well before clicking the end button._

_I placed a call to Jenny before booking my ticket to Boston. I couldn’t sit there any longer while my daughter was in a hospital bed. It was hours later when I finally arrived in Massachusetts for the second time since I left. Julie picked me up from the hospital with a sad smile. “I’ve sent Claire home for rest.” My body deflated from release of my pent up tension. So far I managed to avoid her, and hoped to continue to do so._

_The last time we talked, we parted amicably. While we cried and shared a goodbye kiss, I knew she wasn’t prepared to forgive me. I wasn’t in the forgiving type mood either, and I couldn’t imagine either of us wanting to discuss Gabriel. I hadn't realized I was holding my breath until Julie relayed her daughter's absence to me. I don't think either of us were quite ready, and I still hadn’t entirely decided how I felt about Claire. I knew I was still in love with the woman, but what did that mean for us, for our children? I didn't know._

_“She was being stubborn. She worked a forty-eight hour shift, and then got pulled out because of Isla. She needs her rest at home in her own bed.” I tried to picture her new home, but all i saw_
was the old brickstone apartment we lived in together. I thought of the two rooms, small living room, and decent sized kitchen/dining room. It wasn’t fancy by any means, but it was a home we built together.

Boston was still the same. People sped down the motorway as usual ignoring the signs that said 60 mph. The city continued busy as usual. I missed the energy of Boston and the people I had met during my time in the city. I kept in contact with a few people from school and work. It was strange to note how life continued to go on even when you were no longer there. Claire kept going on. She graduated from medical school at the top of her class, which was impressive given she had two children and suffered a devastating miscarriage at the end of her third year. Then she went through a divorce, and had to figure out her life from there. She started her residency at Mass Gen. She was apparently flourishing from what Julia told me. She was a popular pick amongst the attendings at the hospital.

Julia led me through a series of hallways, and I just followed her. Aside from the maternity ward, I didn’t know my way around the hospital. “I’ll leave you with her. Claire probably won’t be around until seven. I’ll call you when she’s leaving, and I’ll arrange to drop off Bree with you for a bit.” She ruffled my hair with a matronly smile. Julia was always kind to me, and perhaps grew fonder after my father died. She took on the role of another parent for me, and I found myself confiding in her. Even now, she made it clear that she wanted me in her life despite the end of marriage to her daughter.

I pushed open the door and strained my eyes in the dark. An impossibly tiny figure occupied the huge bed. I saw her dark red hair flowing across her pillow. It wasn’t as light as when she was born, and it was another thing I was missing. I wondered if it would stay red or darken to brown.

Her eyes opened blearily as she sensed my presence. “Daddy?” Her voice was scratchy and tired. She scrunched up her face in confusion as she attempted to determine who the strange figure in her room was.

I smoothed back her straight locks. “Oh look at ye, my little princess.” Tears filled her eyes as the pain registered in her awake state. “Dinna fash, ye’ll be fine. Ye had a surgery, but ye’ll heal just fine. Yer mother will take care of ye, and soon ye won’t remember feeling bad. Now why don’t you go back to sleep.” I wanted to soothe her as much as I could with the time I was given. I took her little hand in mine.

“I love you daddy.” I couldn’t believe she was already five years old. She had lost the chubbiness of toddlerhood, and her limbs were lengthening out as she transitioned into a kid. Soon enough she would become a teenager, and I wasn’t prepared for the day. I decided to stay in the moment.

I pressed a kiss to her tiny forehead. “I love ye as well.” I set an alarm on my phone and sat back in the chair. I wanted to be gone by the time Claire arrived at the hospital to check up on Isla. It was better to avoid any confrontations, especially as the girls were older now.

I was awakened during the shift change of the nurses around three am where a nurse checked Isla’s vitals. She was groggy and not pleased with the fussing. She wanted her sleep, and the nurse taking her vitals hid her grin with a well placed cough. “I’m going to put some more medicine in her IV, and she’ll fall right back to sleep.” She informed me with a kind tilt of her lips.

“Thank ye,” the nurse only shook her head and stated it was her job to take care of her patients well-being.

By seven, I was saying my goodbyes to Isla as Claire was on her way over to the hospital. I was going to spend the remainder of the morning and part of the afternoon with Bree before catching my flight back home.
“You traveled all the way to Boston and didn’t tell me?” She didn’t cover the hurt on her face, and I felt a gentle tug at my heartstrings. Guilt was such an interesting emotions, and it pressed harshly at my insides.

I covered her hand with mine. “Well the only people who knew were Jenny, yer mam, and the lasses.”

“I can’t believe the girls never told me. Bree practically told everyone everything back then.” Her face turned thoughtful, and I knew the words that would come out of her mouth next. “Wait... you said there was another visit.” Her eyes were probing and I sighed.

“There were two other ones.” I admitted to her. “The first was before ye moved to yer townhouse. It was months after I moved back to Scotland. I knocked on the door, but someone else answered.” A divot formed between her brows as she stared at me in confusion. “It was a man.” Her brow furrowed further.

“What did he look like?” I described him, and her face dawned in understanding. “Oh, that was Sebastian. He’s gay, but not in an obvious way. We were in a study group together, and sometimes he came over to watch the girls.”

My face flamed in embarassment. “It explains some of his comments.” He was hitting on me. I interpreted the events differently as him comparing us. “Well I feel like an arse.”

She doubled over in laughter when I recounted some of the things her friend said to me. She wiped tears from her eyes, and I grinned at the ease of our exchange. She sat up when she realized i still had one more visit I hadn’t explained yet. “Jamie, what happened during your last one?” Her face was serious, and I suspected she knew I was reluctant to share this particular visit.

_Someday I'll get over you._
_I'll live to see it all through._
_But I'll always miss,_
_Dreaming my dreams with you._

January 2014

_I spent all of Hogomanay thinking about Claire and the things left unsaid between us. I realized one day there was a huge river between us. It was dark and deep and full of the secrets we hid from one another. I stood on one side of the shore, and she stood across from me._

_As time passed, the gap widened. No matter what I did, I couldn’t get across to the other side. There was such a divide between us, and I didn’t know when it began. Through it all though, I found my love her remained in its’ purest form._

_If anything, it grew over time. In the beginning, I felt nothing except from crippling sadness and defeat. I knew it was a mistake the moment I stepped on the plane. I wanted to get off, but it was too late. By the time I arrived in Scotland, puffy and red eyed, I couldn’t go back. I wasn’t in the right sort of mind set to make a desperate plea to my ex wife._

_I was aware of what her eyes begged me in that room. She glanced at me and it was if the whole world fell away. We were the only two people in the entire world. I saw my world in those brown orbs of her, and my hands clutched my thighs desperately as I tried not to stall her hand from signing. I noticed the hesitation as she took the pen in hand. The tension in the room thickened, and I chickened out. She presented me an opportunity to cancel the whole proceedings, and I did nothing but watch her sign documents terminating the life we created together._
I looped my name and watched her leave. She disappeared into the rain, leaving me bereft and helpless. It didn’t take longer before I realized she was the missing piece I left behind.

I walked around for months empty on the inside and trying desperately to find what was no longer there. At night, my heart attempted to claw itself out my chest to return to the rightful owner. Some mornings when the feeling of loneliness was too much, my stomach gurgled and nausea set in. It wasn’t long before I was on my knees in front of the toilet. I clutched desperately at the edges as the contents of my stomach erupted from me.

I visited my doctor who informed it was a response to the stress and changes in my life. He recommended therapy for me and printed a list of some therapists in the area. I thanked him profusely. Months passed before my weekly morning activities ceased.

The problem with my departure was the way in which we left things. There was no proper resolution, merely two strangers sitting across a table, allowing their lawyers to discuss their matters as if they hadn’t spent the better part of nearly ten years together. Communication was one of the first things to disappear.

I was bitter in many ways. My memories were tinged with something characterized as melancholic and an unidentifiable amount of rage directed at her. I didn’t want to remember Claire that way. I also didn’t want to recall the shadow of the woman I knew. A black cloud hung over me and followed wherever I went to rain down on whatever happiness I dredged up.

After four and a half years, I screwed up my courage and braced myself for a trip to Boston. It took countless hours on a couch talking to my therapist for me to arrive at the conclusion I could live without Claire. I had done so now for about as long as we were married. I could it was the point. However, my ultimate realization was I didn’t want to be without her. I simply couldn’t find the desire to want to bridge the distance we forced between ourselves because we couldn’t bare to stare across a kitchen table or share a bed with someone we considered a stranger.

Only I was self-aware enough to understand we weren’t strangers. We were lost. When the river flooded, we ended up on different banks. We couldn’t find a way to be together because we couldn’t meet in the middle. We’d arrived at all sorts of conclusions and made accusations that in my darkest moments I wanted nothing more to take back. Regret was an acrid, bitter taste in my mouth.

I imagined she felt similarly as in the moments following a passionate discussion, I saw in the hollowness of her eyes the shame and remorse seeping through as we both paused to catch our breaths. Our chests heaved with the righteousness of our anger and the justification of our words. We used our words as weapons with our aim direct and true. There were no white flags to wave.

We aimed and fired without a single thought of consideration for the other because we believed ourselves to be the right one. The problem was we were both wrong. We threw away a ten year relationship because we were unable to mend fences. We blamed, yelled, pushed, pulled, and ultimately cried as we dragged one another below the water. We nearly drowned as we reached our opposite sides of the shore.

She sat on her side drenched, coughing up lung fulls of water as her eyes hurled angry accusations. She spewed her venom until her eyes dimmed with despondency, her shoulder sagged in loss as she laid back on her side. The silence dominated us as we eventually turned our backs on one another. If I didn’t face her, I didn’t see the sadness. I didn’t have to see how she dug listlessly in the sand, searching for something that wasn’t there any longer.

I finally understood love wasn’t a possession. Part of me always wanted to consume Claire, to own every single piece of her. I struggled constantly because I feared deep down she didn’t need
me like I needed her. She was bold, confident, and not afraid of braving the world. I followed her because she was sure of her direction. She’d known from a young age what she wanted out of her life, while I went into the unknown making decisions based on feelings of rightness.

Therapy taught me how to reconsider it all in a different way. Claire’s love was a gift, one she bequeathed to me and could be taken back when she desired. It was a weakness of mine to want to wrap her up in my love and keep her for myself. The problem was she wasn’t a woman who required a man at her side. She certainly enjoyed having me there with her to support and cheer her on, but she could survive without my love.

I learned perspective and saw she was trying to give as much as herself to me as she could without losing herself. She had her own issues, and I never took the time think about how she felt about the news of the pregnancy. I was absorbed with my own thoughts about the news of the third pregnancy. In hindsight, it was quite the shock to both of us as we weren’t planning on another kid for at least a few years if ever. Our lives were hectic with the two we already had, work, and school. Adding another child to the equation would’ve made our situation messier. Then she lost the baby, and I regretted every horrible thought that flew through my head during those precious months she carried Gabriel.

I knew she was at the hospital as Bree told me her mom was working a long shift and staying overnight in the hospital. I took a cab straight from the airport to Mass Gen because I needed to bare my soul to my Sassenach. I wanted her to know the depths of my soul, and for her to fully comprehend everything I had was still hers if she wanted.

The hospital was a hot bed of excitement as ambulances pulled in and out of the bay. Employees went to and fro. People crowded around injured loved ones or sat in the waiting room for news. I walked up to the nurses’ station where a woman around my age was sorting through charts.

“Fill out this paperwork and wait for someone to call you back,” she hadn’t lifted her eyes at all.

I cleared my throat, waiting patiently for her to meet my eyes. “Actually, I’m looking for Dr. Claire Fraser.”

Her gaze was appraising and made me feel vaguely uncomfortable. “I think she’s in cardiology.” She gave me directions to my destination. I thanked her for her assistance before quickly departing. I knew she desired me, but I wasn’t going to give her false hope.

There was no need to make it all the way to cardiology because I spotted her from a distance. The problem was she wasn’t alone. She sat beside a blonde haired man as he told her something or other and made her laugh. She threw back her head in a carefree manner and her laughter rang out across the room. I forgot how rich the sound was and how it lifted me out of my darkness. She hadn’t laughed like that in my presence in years. Our conversations were stiff and formal and centered around our shared children.

It was when his head tilted closer to hers, their lips brushing chastely that I felt the world spinning out of control. At first, I saw red. The embers of rage burned hotly inside of me until I caught the expression on her face. There was such a raw tenderness on her pretty face. I hadn’t seen her look like that since before she told me about the third pregnancy.

She slid a hand up to cup his face and brought his closer to hers where their kiss became not so chaste. His hands reached into her hair until he pulled out her hair tie. Her hair tumbled down in unfamiliar soft waves as he buried his hands in it. I could practically feel the phantom silkiness against the pads of my own fingers.

Almost as if she felt the pull of my gaze, she wrenched herself free, her eyes searching as I ducked
out of sight. I wouldn’t allow her to feel guilty about what occurred. My greatest desire in life was her happiness.

I tried not to stoke the stirrings of jealousy bubbling in my stomach and pushed it back to a mild gurgle. Someone else was doing what I couldn’t, and she was a free woman. I peeked around the corner once more to find him teasingly stealing sips of her coffee. Her eyes rolled skyward as she stole a kiss from him.

I froze as her voice floated across the room. “Well I’ve got to go Peter, my surgery is in fifteen minutes.” I knew she had only one year left of residency, and I wondered if she was performing solo surgeries now. “I’ll check with my mum about this weekend.” She left him to finish the coffee before departing.

There was an extra pep in her step. She radiated light and joy, and I almost thought about chasing after her. Instead I turned around to let her live her life. Perhaps someday fate would choose to reunite us again. If not, I still had the memories of the years we spent together.

Tears sparkled in her eyes until the dam seemed to break and I held onto her as she sobbed into my chest. I hadn’t actually meant to tell her everything, but as soon as the words started coming out, I was a man possessed. I needed her to know how much she still meant to me even if we couldn’t be together.

It was some time before she pulled back. I ran the pads of my fingers under eyes, rubbing away the remnants of her crying. Her skin was soft and silky under my touch. She leaned into my touch instinctually. “Ye kent I love ye.”

She nodded sorrowfully, her lips jutting out in a tremble. Her body shook with barely repressed sobs. “Why didn’t you—” she cut herself off as if rethinking her choice of words. “I would’ve talked to you. What you don’t know is Peter and I were still newly dating at that point. It wasn’t serious.”

Her tone indicated the status of her relationship was much different now. “Is it serious?”

She flicked her eyes between the doorway and me. A sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach told me I didn’t want to know, but I was a masochist. If I no longer had a chance with her, I wanted official confirmation she belonged to another.

Tears fell in reckless abandon down her face, but I made no move to clear them. I hated the distress on her face, but I needed to hear the words. Finally with a deep breath, she admitted, “Peter proposed to me the day of Isla’s accident.” Her eyes told me to stay put as there was more. “I haven’t given him a proper answer. He knows I’m conflicted especially by the concept of remarrying.”

I did the only thing I could do. I kissed her.

And she kissed back.

_Someday I'll get over you._
_I'll live to see it all through._
_But I'll always miss,_
_Dreaming my dreams with you._

_-Dreaming My Dreams With You, Waylon Jennings_
I savored the taste of her on my lips. Her lips parted as I deepened the kiss, and immediately my tongue sought hers. I’d forgotten what it felt like to be so deeply connected and intertwined with another individual. I was claiming her as mine, and perhaps she understood this as her lips sought my own hungrily.

Her tongue flicked against mine, taunting me, and the stirrings of arousal awoke inside of me. With Claire, it never took much for me to become hard.

I cupped her face, the kiss deepening between us until she wrenched her face from mine as she attempted to catch her breath. My own came out in pants as I rested my forehead against hers.

Up close I saw the tiny freckles she hid with make-up. There were some new ones, probably from all the sun she had back home. Her eyes shone brightly with love and arousal, but the dilation of her pupils almost completely overtook the deep brown color of her eyes.

She gingerly brushed her lips against mine and I was lost in my own personal heaven. I couldn’t imagine anything feeling better in a million years.

In the distance, I heard the vague ringing of a cellphone, but I ignored it in favor of the sweet, saltiness of her lips. The taste was so rich. My lips soon worked their way over her face, and her eyes slowly fluttered close. Her head tilted back providing access to her neck where I nipped none to gently at the skin. I pulled back on the pressure so as not to leave an unexplainable mark.

My thoughts were invaded once again by the ringing, and it wasn’t until she halted our activities, I realized the phone was hers.

The color left her face as she paled and her face morphed into one of horror. She quickly jumped up, whilst answering the phone. “Peter,” she said quietly as she left me to my thoughts.

I rubbed a hand over my face as it fully caught up to me what we did. I hadn’t recognized or acknowledged my feelings for her in such a long time. I wouldn’t allow myself too because she was in a relationship. She needed something I couldn’t provide for her all those years ago.

An immense amount of shame flooded through me as I thought about the kiss we shared. While she certainly participated, I was the one who initiated the kiss. I didn’t want her to destroy the relationship she had with this Peter because for what I knew, he was a good guy. He cared about her and respected her.

They obviously were serious enough to the point where he assumed the next step was marriage. I didn’t know where Claire was in that equation, but I imagined she was giving the proposal serious consideration.
My head leaned back into the wall and I cursed loudly, thankful for the lack of people around. What was I thinking?

She came here to be with our daughter, and to eventually take her home after the accident. I’m sure it helped to resolve some of our issues as well to make the situation easier on our children, but I guarantee it was never her intent when she flew across the world to end up in a lip lock with her ex.

I enjoyed it, but I knew eventually Claire would feel the ramifications of that kiss. It’s not something to take lightly because it wasn’t melancholic or tender in the way our last one was. The kiss we shared in this room was full of promise, hope, and love. Perhaps a wee bit of passion was mixed in there as well. She could possibly deny the feelings behind the kiss, and I wouldn’t put it past her to do it. I recognized a Claire shut down mode when I saw it.

Almost twenty years since I met her, and I knew about every single side of her.

Some of them came later in our relationship as we discovered each other in different stages. There was the friendship where we were tentative yet full of inquiry as we tried our best to share basic facts about ourselves. As the months flew by, we moved into a different phase where we acknowledged the chemistry and passion that sizzled between us. We shared stories and feelings we wouldn’t tell anyone else.

It was during the transition to this step when I saw different dimensions of her. As a friend, she didn’t have to share every detail about herself or inform me when she wasn’t up to sharing.

As a couple, we explored our feelings with discussions. I wanted to know everything about the girl I saw and talked to everyday.

She had a sense of humor. It was strange as most people assumed she was serious all the time, but my Claire could be as crude and witty as they come. Most of the jokes she made were highly inappropriate for most company, but I enjoyed hearing them in private moments shared between us.

Then there was the emotional/hysterical version of her. It was perhaps the most interesting facet of her personality as she rarely showed it to anyone including myself, which inevitably led to tension between us as I knew she intentionally kept things from me. She buried her emotions deep inside of herself, which then came spilling out during emotionally trying situations. I didn’t know during those times what to do to calm her down. The first time it happened was in the days following Isla’s birth.

October 2006

Claire adamantly refused to leave our daughter’s side in the hospital. I tried to coax her multiple times to at least go home to rest, but she shook her head with a stubborn determination and her chin jutted out prepared for any argument I could think up.

It was the first time the baby in the incubator stopped breathing and the staff began their attempts to revive her I saw how it affected her.

She would never admit when she needed help or anything from anyone including myself, which at times was an issue. I confronted her on several occasions about it because I knew deep down she didn’t need me the way I needed her. She could easily live without my presence as a constant in her life and perfectly live after. I was the one who knew I had to have her by my side for the rest of my days because she completed me. She made up all the best parts of who I was, and while I wasn’t entirely sure anymore where she began and I ended, I didn’t feel as if it mattered anymore
that we became one entity.

Claire would beg to differ, but that was a different matter altogether.

The doctors sat us down to explain Isla was struggling to breathe because of her underdeveloped lungs. She’d arrived so early, and the steroids given to her were helping, but not as much as the doctors liked. Her heart was also struggling as well, and she would require heart surgery.

I saw the conflict in her eyes, read it on her face, and observed it in her body language. She was tense as she considered in her mind the best option for our child. I generally deferred to her for medical opinions because she was the one studying to become a doctor. While she was still in her first year, she still knew quite a bit more about it than I did.

Her eyes flashed between a variety of browns never settling on one as her emotions were becoming too much for her to handle. It was as we sat by our daughter’s side when she began to crumble in front of me.

I had never seen one of her meltdowns in my life, but I was aware of them. Her mother told me about her inability to share what she was feeling and how at times when she could no longer handle the pressure and the stress in her life, she completely fell apart.

She’d gone to therapy since her father’s passing at five, but had yet to find a way to fully cope. She channeled everything into her work and family without dealing with the problem.

Her fingers brushed against the small upturned hand of our yet to be named daughter. She was simply Baby Fraser. We thought we had more time to think of names for her as she wasn’t supposed to be born until December.

The infant didn’t react to the touch of her mother. Her eyes were taped shut, and her chest moved up and down frequently with the harsh sounds of the ventilator. There were so many wires and tubes around her, and I was terrified. She was smaller than any of Jenny’s children at a mere four pounds. Her skin was almost translucent and the miniscule veins visible.

It wasn’t supposed to happen this way, which was what every parent says when their child is born prematurely. The baby still had several more weeks to gestate, but Claire was diagnosed during her second trimester with preeclampsia resulting in a total placental abruption. The doctors had no choice except to deliver the baby by a Caesarean. They couldn’t quite explain to me why her condition caused the abruption only that it was one of the known causes.

Claire quickly removed her hand and herself from the NICU, but not before I saw the stream of tears falling down her face. It startled me how beautiful she was despite the crying. Hers was a silent pain, one she refused to share with me.

I stared longingly at my daughter. I wanted to remain with her; I knew however, her mommy needed me more and perhaps for the first time in our relationship. I wouldn’t let her down. I promised her the world and a healthy child, and I couldn’t allow myself to think of any scenario except us leaving the hospital with our child.

I found her in the chapel. She generally turned to faith when life threw her a wrench. I strained to hear her words, but I knew it provided her some sort of solace to pray to God. Sometimes her faith came into conflict with her studies, and she attempted her best to resolve the conflict between religion and science. Normally she picked one over the other, and prayed to God she made the right decision.

“Please don’t take her away from me, I can’t fail her. I know it might not be in your plan, but I
don’t know if could survive her death.” It made me wonder which prayer she chose to start. She finished with, “O my God, I firmly believe that Thou art one God, in three Divine Persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost; I believe that Thy Divine Son became man and died for our sins and that He will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe these and all the truths which the holy Catholic Church teaches, because Thou hast revealed them, Who canst neither deceive nor be deceived.” She was finding faith in something tragic.

Her eyes sparkled with tears, her face red with emotion, her nose sniffling, and her skin pale with worry. “I thought you would come.” She said upon noticing my arrival.

“The prayer of Faith?” I questioned her, curious to her reply.

A sigh fell from her drawn lips as she scooted over to allow me to sit. “I think we could use all the faith we can get at the moment. Our baby sh-” the words were swallowed into her sobs as her hands covered her face and her body shook uncontrollably.

I sat there for a second before gently lifting her and placing her body in my lap. My arms wrapped around her petite form, and I held her as she released all of her pent up emotions.

I knew what she was feeling as mine probably mirrored hers. There was anger for our child suffering and not having enough time to form inside her mother where she should still be. There was an infinite amount of sadness for what Claire was going through and for all the possible surgeries we were facing. Then there was the worry that I would never have the opportunity to hold my daughter. The baby wouldn’t have a chance to live, and I found my heart unable to handle the amount of pain the thought brought me. I buried my face in Claire’s hair and cried.

I think it terrified her to realized how broken I was as well. Her own crying ceased. She raked her fingers through my hair as she shushed me. “It’s alright honey,” her voice held promise, I wasn’t entirely confident she believed.

It scared me there was a chance our baby girl would die without us having named her. “What can I do?” She croaked into my ear. Her arms were tight around my neck, but I enjoyed the warmth she brought. Her touch was like the sun shooing away all the gray and gloomy clouds. “Please,” she begged me.

“I want to name her.” Claire pulled back with her brows pulled together. “I can’t allow her to continue living without a name.” She also caught the words I didn’t say. I can’t allow her to die either.

The tension left her frame as her shoulders relaxed and she settled into my chest. Her fingers played with the hair on my arms as she pondered names.

“Did I ever tell ye where my mam lived as a girl?” She shook her head and I sensed her confusion at what she assumed was an unrelated segue. “Well while t’s is true she spent her later years in the Highlands, she is actually from an island called Islay. It’s in the Inner Hebrides, which is an archipelago off the west coast. It’s the southernmost island in the Inner Hebrides. It’s six hundred and twenty kilometers, so fairly large for an island surrounding Great Britain. It’s not huge by most standards with around three thousand people, but the main business is whiskey distillation.” I paused as I thought about when my mother took Jenny and I when we were young on holiday.

“It’s popular for bird watchers as well. My favorite part of the islands are the views from the bluffs. It’s absolutely gorgeous with the red and green cliffs. The water is so blue and vast. I loved watching the horizon and all the shifting colors at sunset. It was different than what I knew at home. We didn’t leave the Highlands often.”
I continued to describe the coastline of the island with the ports and towns and the simplicity of it all. I wanted to share something with her I coveted for myself all these years. I hadn’t felt the desire to share and kept the memories in my heart after the passing of my mother. It hurt too much to think about all those special holidays where I practiced my Gaelic.

“Jamie,” she turned in my arms with confusion in her eyes. “I don’t understand why you’re telling me this. I love you’re sharing, but how does it relate to picking a name.”

I always counted on her to keep me in the moment. “Well a somewhat popular name came from the name of the island.” She raised a brow. “Isla, I want her to have a piece of my homeland.”

I saw as she worked it over in her head. I don’t think she minded I chose the name of our child. “Do ye like it?” I tried to hide the excitement on my face, but I knew she saw through me.

A small smile formed on her own. “I do. I was thinking Faith could be her middle name.” I gave her a gentle squeeze.

“Isla Faith Fraser,” I murmured and felt a warmth spread through my body. It was her name.

While it took some time before our baby was able to go home, Claire suffered emotionally and went back to Church. She regularly went to confession, and I yearned to know what she told the priest; it wasn’t actually my business however as what she shared was between him, her, and God. I respected her right to privacy, but it pained me all the same she felt there were things she couldn’t tell me.

She wanted to protect me from her thoughts and feelings, and while I appreciated it, it created a sort of divide between us. Claire seemed only to be able to share half of herself with me. I didn’t know how to feel, knowing she was in agony and couldn’t tell me.

I cooled off enough and went in search of Bree. Jenny was more than likely lurking somewhere around the area as well, and I desperately required her advice for how to proceed going forth with Claire. It was apparent we weren’t to be trusted by ourselves any longer as the tension and passion was too much for us to handle. I wish it weren’t the way it was, but we needed to bridge some distance. It would ultimately hurt a lot less for me when her and Isla left in a few days.

I spotted Claire in the distance with her free arm waving about, a scowl on her pretty face, and I imagined the sort of tone she was using. It wasn’t any of my business however what she was discussing with her boyfriend.

My head poked into Isla’s room to find it devoid of human life. My brow furrowed in worry as panic arose inside of me. Where the hell were my children? I quickly rushed over to Claire.

“Where are the girls?” I asked her.

She turned to face me and covered the mouthpiece of her mobile. “What are you talking about Jamie?”

I tried not to let my impatience and irritation show, but the woman knew how to work my last nerve. “I mean the girls are not in Isla’s room.”

“What?” Her face pinched with worry and terror. “I’m going to call you back. I don’t understand, they were just in there when I check on them.”

“Clearly, they aren’t there now. Where could they have gone?” Isla was only a few days post-surgery, and her leg made it so she couldn’t easily travel. She required the use of a wheelchair.
She glared murderously at me as if I were accusing her of something, which with my tone I probably was. “I don’t know.” She growled at me. As quickly as panic set in, relief took its place. The girls came around the corner with an unfamiliar woman. Isla sat in her wheel chair with her leg propped up. Bree hung on the arm of the woman, and my nieces were mesmerized.

I glanced over to Claire to ask her about the woman when she took off. She threw her arms around the woman’s neck and squeezed for dear life. “Oh Claire, enough with the histrionics. This isn’t high school.” Ah an American, I thought and was beginning to understand it was a friend. “Your mother told me what happened, and I was in Manchester at the time. I decided to come check up on my favorite eleven year old.” Isla flushed and waved her hand dismissively.

Bree’s words only confirmed the identity of her mysterious stranger. “Auntie Mel says she’s going to fly home with you and Isla. I wish I could go.” A deep pout set in on her face and my breath caught. “But I will have daddy to myself.” Her eyes fell on me and she smiled.

She moved over towards me so she could tug me in the direction of a woman who had probably spent more time with my children than I had. “Auntie Mel, this is my daddy.” Bree proudly announced with a toothy grin.

Melody was a beautiful woman, but very different in comparison to Claire. She was a natural blonde by the looks of it. Her eyes were sea green and the sun kissed look of her skin made them appear more vibrant. They were around the same height with Melody an inch or two taller. There was a ring on her finger, and I supposed Claire likely forgot to tell me.

“Hello Jamie, I’ve heard a lot about you.” She held out her hand and firmly shook mine when I offered it. Claire glared daggers at her and I wondered that was all about. “You look just like I expected. I see exactly where these gingers get it.” She tugged on Bree’s braid as I had done earlier. “Although you’re quite tall. I wasn’t actually counting on that, but now I know why Bree is so tall. She was always taller than all the other kids.” Bree beamed at the praise offered to her.

“Bree has told me all about beach trips at the Vineyard and skiing and snowboarding.”

“Yes, well Bree is quite prodigious actually, she mastered her skills for her beginner lessons quickly. The instructor was so impressed. He wasn’t expecting it all.” Bree ducked her head bashfully, and it was strange to see this side of her.

Claire intervened to remind us of Isla who was still in the chair. “I’m going to help Isla get settled back in bed. Mags and Kitty come, I made need your assistance. Bree, I need you to clean up your things in your sister’s room.”

Bree’s face contorted into annoyance. “Mommy,” she whined, her voice becoming quite high. “That’s not fair.”

“Now Bree,” Claire commanded. Bree stomped ahead to the room as the girls followed in her wake.

“I guess you’ve never really seen that side of Bree before, huh?” Melody asked me with a gentle smile.

I shook my head. “Normally the girls are on their best behavior when they visit me. I’ve seen a few spats between them, but I normally never have to ask more than once.” I informed her.

“Would you like to get some coffee?” I appreciated her extending an olive branch.

I wasn’t sure why but I felt as if I were in a competition with her. She hadn’t actually done anything me, but it was hard not to feel envious of a woman who spent so much time around my
children. She knew them better than I did. “Sure.” I agreed because I did want to know her better. She was a huge part of my family’s life.

We sat across from one another in the cafeteria and she sipped at the coffee. “It’s the only thing hospitals can do right.” Her face was serene as she inhaled the warm, bitter smell of coffee.

I forgot she was a surgeon like Claire. She had mentioned they met during their residency. “So ye and Claire were residents together?”

She tipped her head back, her blonde curls following. She hummed softly in agreement. “Yes, we had the same resident. It was actually during one of our breaks when I caught her crying in the locker room that I chanced it and decided to speak to her.”

My eyes dropped to my steaming coffee. It wasn’t hard to figure out the cause of Claire’s crying. “I don’t know what to say to ye.” I admitted out loud. She was disarming in her approach as she remained mostly silent.

“You still love her.”

My eyes widened and I sputtered. “N-no don’t be s-so ridiculous.”

“It’s alright if you do. I’m sure you know about Peter.” I firmly nodded. “He’s been good to her, but sometimes I get the impression she’s not always with him in her head. Obviously I don’t want my best friend to ruin her relationship especially for a guy living on the other side of the Atlantic.”

I sort of sensed where she was leading the conversation, but I was still confused. “But?”

“I like you. Your girls praise you to the moon and back. Claire’s never spoken a bad word about you. I always wondered what sort of man you were.” I hung my head in shame. “There’s nothing wrong with self-care. Sometimes the first time an opportunity comes around we don’t know it’s the right one. Now if we’re really lucky, we might get a second one. It’s what we do the second time around that makes all the difference.”

My head snapped up as I openly scrutinized this woman, Claire’s best friend. What exactly did she mean? Claire made it apparent she was in a relationship and it was more than a little serious. He proposed marriage, and she was giving the decision thoughtful consideration. I couldn’t interfere with that process as I already screwed up her life enough, and I wanted her to think about the situation without me factored in as a possible option.

A coy smile appeared on her lips as she regarded me once more. “I never told her about your Christmas visit.” I sat back and gaped like a fish out of water. “Why didn’t you follow my advice then?”

**December 2011**

*I hadn’t informed Jenny of my decision to fly to America. It wasn’t a conscious one either. I simply woke up that morning tired of all my loneliness.*

*The walls were caving in and I was suffocating under all of it. Every morning was repetitious where I stumbled out of my bed into the bleary morning, where nothing changed. I simply continued to exist without any true joy in my life.*

*If there was one regret I had, it was the ease in which I exited my marriage. As soon as she said the forbidden words, I left her life. I hadn’t attempted to argue or fight for our marriage, and I was a coward for that. If I loved her, I wouldn’t have allowed her to so freely withdraw from everything. I knew after Gabriel’s premature death she struggled endlessly to return to whatever*
sort of normalcy she could, and I didn’t assist in making her life easier.

She disconnected from me, and I didn’t stop it.

I hated watching as she withdrew into herself with each passing day. Some days she stared listlessly out the window looking out onto the street with tears blurring her vision. She wiped her eyes with the corner of her sleeves as I entered and sent me a shaky smile, but I knew it was as fake as the one my uncle gave me when I married Claire.

Yet through all this time, I discovered she wasn’t a stranger during that time. I recognized all the bits of her, but had never seen them comingling together. It was so much for me to handle.

My attempts at flattening my hair were abysmal, and I stopped when I reached the door of her house. I double checked the address on the piece of paper before ringing the doorbell.

I did my best to not fidget or shift anxiously as I awaited for someone to answer the door. It wasn’t Claire who opened the door but a blonde woman. Her eyes were the color of a stormy sea as she coolly looked upon me. She had an athletic build and was almost as tall as me. Her hair was thrown up in a messy, blonde bun. She wasn’t someone I would’ve assumed Claire to be friends with considering past associations.

“Yes, can I help you?” I figured her accent for a New England one right away. She had the coldness down pat, and the manner in which she carried herself, I pegged as someone who vacationed on the coast.

I shifted uncomfortably under her unnerving gaze. Her face was growing impatient as I continued to stand there on my ex-wife’s door step. I cough to clear my throat. “I’m looking for Claire Fraser.” At least, I was positive she continued to use my surname. I wasn’t actually sure if she reverted back to Beauchamp or not.

One of her eyebrows rose quite spectacularly. “Who are you? Is she expecting you?” She crossed her arms over her chest and her stance changed to a defensive position.

“My name is Jami.” She cut me off as she reached for my arm and dragged me inside. I supposed she knew who I was if she never gave me the opportunity to finish introducing myself.

I glanced around the house as she led me down the hall, and was impressed by the hominess of the place. All of the flooring was hard wood including the staircase. There were photos of the girls lining the walls. Many of them I had copies of myself, but some I hadn’t seen before. At the head of the stairs was Isla’s school picture from kindergarten. Next to it was a pre-school picture of Bree.

There was a bench carefully placed in front of the half wall of the staircase. There were cutesy cushions decorating it and a lone stuffed animal. In the living room, there was a fireplace with pale wood outlining it. The couches were white, and rug had some sort of intricate design.

In her kitchen, she had pale wood cabinets with a granite countertop. The place felt airy with all of the windows flooding light into the house. It was such a contrast to the apartment in which we previously resided. There were even angled windows in the ceiling allowing light further access.

We sat at the polished wooden table and I marveled at her home. There were pictures of the girls on the walls. A calendar next to the fridge had all sorts of activities and appointments listed for each day of the week. It seemed as if Claire was out with the girls at a dentist appointment. It was circled in a red marker.

“I guess ye ken who I am?” I asked her friend, who still didn’t have a name.
She watched me with a strange gleam in her eyes. “Claire’s told me about you, but even if you hadn’t said anything Bree is the image of you. Honestly, I was more shocked by your appearance here than anything as I know you live in Scotland now.” There was a hint of disapproval she didn’t voice aloud, but I heard it all the same.

“I suppose ye have some sort of feelings about it?”

Her eyes dropped to her folded hands on kitchen table. “No, my parents divorced when I was six. I spent most of my childhood with my mom, pining away for my dad. He sent for me during the summers, but hired a nanny to cater to my needs. I rarely saw him. He died before I graduated from medical school.” Her eyes held a watery sheen, but not a single tear fell from her grassy colored orbs. “I’ve grown quite attached to your daughters, and I don’t want that sort of life for them.”

A deep furrow developed between my brows as I understood her implications. “I would never allow someone else to watch over my daughters when I can. I’m trying to be there for them in the best way that I can.” I was trying my best to not allow my temper to get the best of me.

She held up her hand with apologetic eyes. “That’s not actually what I meant. My parents hated each other, but just seeing Claire when she accidentally talks about you or your eyes when I say her name, there’s still something there.” She frowned when I opened my mouth to immediately disagree. Yet she was right considering I was there in Claire’s house. “Is that the reason you’re here?” Her eyes softened and brightened immensely.

“Yes,” I sighed.

She sat back in her chair. “I’m Melody by the way. I suppose I forgot to mention it when I opened the door.” I grinned a little. “Claire and I met on our first day of our residency. She’s such an intelligent woman. You’re truly lucky.” My eyes must have showed my disbelief and bewilderment. Her laugh was the sound of chiming bells, and I saw how she fit into Claire’s life. “She’s remarkable. She never says one negative word against you even when other people question your absence. She simply says it’s none of their business, and that you’ve worked out an agreement.”

As I listened to Melody speak, I realized something about her. She was in love with Claire. It wasn’t obvious at first, but her eyes sparkled when she told me about how vibrant she was and the life she was living.

“You may not believe it, but I secretly think she’s waiting for you to return. She rejects all advances from both males and females, and spends a lot of time here with the girls. Are you here to get her back?” I was gob smacked by the brazenness of her question. It wasn’t actually any of her business what I did.

I scrubbed my face as I considered all of my options. If what she said were true, Claire wanted me back. She was waiting for me to cross the divide we created over two years ago. “Why do you care?” I was curious about her involvement.

Her lips pursed uncharacteristically for what I knew of her so far. Then she flattened her palms onto the table. “I’ve seen her hurt. I actually met her because she was crying in the locker room. I thought at first it was because of the stress of our first shift until I realized there was this sort of brokenness in her eyes. As we got closer, she opened up about you and told me your whole history together. There was a lightness to her when she spoke about the past. Her demeanor shifted and she vibrated with life. Your girls adore you more than anything, and I know it would benefit all of you if you were back here.”
Her phone buzzed and she quickly excused herself to the next room. My gaze swept over the kitchen, and I easily pictured the girls and Claire sitting down for breakfast. There was a box of some sugary cereal on the counter. I imagined Isla begging her mother to allow her to pour her own cereal.

The refrigerator was massive, but I was accustomed to the sight. It was an American thing. Art, pictures, and school reminders decorated the front. The dish cabinet had glass doors, and I saw the matching dish sets. It was a proper home. The problem was I didn’t know if I fit in it. There were hints of Christmas around the house and on the outside. I didn’t check to see if Claire had gotten a tree yet or not. It would serve no other purpose than to remind me I wasn’t spend Christmas with them.

Was Melody right? Did Claire want me the way I wanted her?

Melody re-entered the room with an apologetic look. “I’ve been paged to the hospital. I need to leave. If you decide to stay, well you’ll definitely improve my view of males. Even if you don’t, I’m rooting for you in the long run. Lock up if you leave, there’s a key buried on the right side of the little glass frog.” Just like that she was gone with a click of her expensive heels.

“Still rooting for me?” I asked boldly.

Her arms folded unhappily across her chest and she analyzed me. “Should I?”

I deflated at her question because it wasn’t without merit. “I can’t screw up this thing she has with Peter.” I would feel awful about it, and it wouldn’t endear Claire to me.

She waved her hand dismissively at the mention of Peter. “There’s something to be said for a second love that follows an indescribable first love. Most people use the term quieter, more subdued. They don’t necessarily love the person less, but it’s a different sort of love than the one you previously had. Ultimately, yes your goal isn’t to ruin her relationship. You want to make her away she has options. As far as your concerned, she no longer believes your available to her that way.”

I honestly believed the woman’s talents were wasted on medicine. She had such an insight into the mind and motivations of others. Perhaps it was a side effect of the turmoil of her parents’ relationship.

“As I said, I honestly am rooting for you. The amazing thing is you’re not pining away for her. While you still want her by your side, you’re not demanding her to return. You’re being yourself, and let me tell you Bree was quite chatty. She told me all about the trip to the beach.”

Bree was such an interesting combination of traits. She never quite understood the concepts of privacy or secrecy. She told everyone everything, and then erupted in giggles when we figured out the culprit. It wasn’t intentional; she simply couldn’t hold it any longer.

“It was reminiscent of the past. Claire and I spent a lot of time at the beach when we were younger. I realized we hadn’t ever gone with Bree together though. In many ways we cheated her more than her sister. We talked though and it was different than in the past.”

“You weren’t talking at each other with the sole purpose of making the other see the validity of your argument. You were listening and contributing, and communicating the way you should’ve all along.” She sipped her coffee. “It’s hard when you’ve been with someone for so long. You know all of their little quirks and annoyances, and it’s easy to become short tempered with them. You sort of lose sight at some point. It happens to the best of us.” She shrugged with a helpless sort of look.
Something in her eyes shifted and she became quite uneasy. I wonder about the mysterious, dark glint in her eyes. “What is it?” I had a feeling it was about Claire.

Her eyes casted a dark shadow and I wondered if I wanted to know. “I-I don’t know if I’m the one who should share this with you or not.” Her lips were bleeding from the pressure of her teeth. I sensed the seriousness of what she wasn’t saying. “Jamie, did anyone tell you Claire almost died last year?”

The color drained from my face at her proclamation. “What?”

“It happened during the summer when the girls were here with you. She was in a car accident and spent six weeks in the hospital.”

I shook my head, refusing to accept her words. “You’re lying.” I accused her. “The girls FaceTimed her twice a week. They would’ve said something.”

Her face saddened and she shook her head. “Julia, a few nurses, and I covered her face in make-up and used her hair cover some of the other lacerations. She had some stitches around her hairline from when her head smacked the window. Luckily, the head of plastics adores her and is fantastic at her job. She broke her left hip and leg. There was a fracture wrist involved, and her collarbone broke when the airbag finally deployed. It was delayed and turned out there was a malfunction.” My mouth fell open as she listed Claire’s injuries. “There was surgery to repair the damage done to her hip and leg. She was in physical therapy for a while as the bones were slow to heal. When the girls came home, she told them she’d just broken a leg.”

I leaned back into my chair as I took in her words. I understood the underlying message she was attempting to convey to me. I’d almost unknowingly lost Claire forever because I couldn’t get the courage to say what needed saying. If I continued the way I was, I would lose her in one form or another.

My hands rose to cover my face to hide the weakness of my tears. I had no problem crying, but it had always embarrassed me to do so in front of others.

Her hand removed one of mine from my face and she held it in hers. “It’s alright to be upset. She should’ve told you. I told her you deserved to know at least as the girls’ father, but you know how she is.”

Aye, I did. “If ye don’ mind I think I need some air.” I rushed for the nearest exit as I tried failingly to fill my lungs with air. I bent over with my hands resting on my the tops of my thighs.

I felt the wetness on my cheeks as tears streamed down my face. What would have I done if she’d left me? Would I have known before receiving the call? I imagined I could sense such a thing if it occurred, but I came to the conclusion I would rather be there by her side.

Someone began to tenderly stroke my hair and I glanced up into the most stunning brown eyes. They were sympathetic and full of worry, which I realized was solely for me. “Why did ye not tell me?” I sobbed out as she cradled my head against her stomach.

“What would I have said to you over the phone? There wasn’t anything you could, and I didn’t want your pity.”

I removed myself from her grasp to tower over her. I’d always appreciated her small size in comparison to mine. She’d lost weight from the last time I saw her in person, and her figure was more than a wee bit tantalizing. She could be every man’s desire if she so wanted. “Ye think what I feel for ye is pity?”
She lowered her eyes, her eyelashes resting against her cheeks. “No,” she replied. “I know very well what it is you feel.” Her eyes rose to meet mine and I saw all the conflicting emotions. “I didn’t say anything because I knew you would come regardless of the situation between us.”

Well she had me there. “Sassenach,” I breathed softly as I cupped her face. Her head turned into my touch.

I stroked away a tear. “Don’t cry, please,” I begged her.

“We’ve made a dog’s breakfast of everything. It’s all such a mess, and I don’t know how to fix any of it. You’re right when you said I should’ve rung you, but I didn’t feel as if I had the right. I willingly allowed you to leave without a fight, and that is perhaps my biggest regret.” Her face was wrenched in agony and I pulled her into my chest. Her arms were strong around me as she cried whatever tears she had left at this point.

“Can I admit something to you?” She whispered into my body, her grasp around me tight. “My first thought when the other driver smashed into the driver’s side of my car was about you. I worried I wouldn’t have the chance to fix my mistakes.”

I pressed a kiss to her and inhaled the faint scents of honey, vanilla, and something purely Claire. “What about Peter?”

“I don’t know. I’m all torn up inside about possibly hurting him. We live over three thousand miles apart. How would it ever work?” I buried my smile in her hair as I relished in the return of my Claire. She was always practical and worrying about the future instead of living in the moment. It was a quirk that endeared me to her immensely. “I don’t want to be a horrible person.”

Wetness soaked through my shirt, but I didn’t mind.

I ran my fingers through her long, dark locks. “I would never think such a thing about you. If Peter does then he doesn’t deserve you at all. I won’t force ye to pick me, but ye will need to make a choice soon.”

Her hold tightened around me. “I don’t want to think about it tonight.”

I didn’t want to think about it either. I loved her, and I knew she returned my feelings. She was in anguish though because there was someone else involved. There was potential for a lot of hurt with the situation we found ourselves in, and I had to be careful in my endeavors to get back with her. From what I saw of the man, he didn’t deserve any sort of humiliation that could possibly arise. He loved her, and that was his only crime.

“I promise we will figure it all out. Tonight let’s collect Bree, and I’ll drop you off at your hotel.”

She glanced up at me through thick lashes, and I swallowed back a moan. “You’re welcome to stay in the room with us. There’s two beds.” She informed me. “We’ve had a long day, and I would feel awful if you were to get in an accident on the way home. There’s a lot to process.”

“Aye, are ye sure Sassenach?”

Her eyelids fluttered at the term of endearment. She told me in the beginning she found it offensive until she heard the loving tone in which I said it. “Yes, there’s also a sofa if Bree doesn’t want to bunk with me.” Our fingers twined together as we made our way back through the building to collect an exhausted little girl. I carried her back to the car.

Claire and Mel talked with Mel getting in a rented vehicle to her own hotel.
Despite the claims of separate beds or the offer of a sofa, Claire invited me into hers, only for sleeping. She snuggled into my arms, and it was the first time in years I felt true contentment as I drifted off to sleep. I never wanted to forget this sort of feeling. In a few days, Claire would still be gone, and I would have to figure out my next steps.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who has liked, commented, or bookmarked my story. I do try to comment back on everyone's comments because I appreciate all of you readers so much. They you for continuing on this journey.
Love Until It Hurts

Chapter Summary

Passion!

Chapter Notes

Don't hate me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Following your hearts like flying blind in the dark
  I know it's what's I'm gonna do
  It's hard to know where you going
  When the wind keeps blowing
  So I'll just keep holding onto you
  When it feels like fighting and trying
  When it looks like falling here me calling

CPOV

I stared at his blonde eyelashes as the light from the window illuminated his face. They rested on his cheeks as his face remained relaxed in slumber. He was such a beautiful sight and I wished we could stay here forever. Yet, it wasn’t meant to be. I had a job to return to and a little girl to get settled at home.

My flight departed in a few hours, and as much as I enjoyed his arms around me, the warmth he provided not only my skin but my soul, I needed to started getting ready.

The room was a conglomerate of scents. I smelled the erotic stench of sex, but there was something purely Jamie in the room. Then there was the scent of us not related to sex. I sighed as I traced the contours of his face despite having memorized them years ago. The light casted shadows upon his face, and I saw the dark circles under his eyes.

The last two weeks were a beautiful mess of redemption, forgiveness, and hope.

I wished it could last.

16 hours earlier

It was a full family affair the morning I woke up with Jamie in my bed. At some point during the night Bree migrated over from her bed into my bed.

She sleepily murmured about her daddy being in my bed. “’s nice.” Her voice slurred, thick with
sleep.

I pressed a kiss to her hair and drifted back into my dreams.

Luckily, we managed to avoid the sort of awkwardness one might express waking up in the arms of their ex. Jamie crawled into Bree’s unused bed before we’d awoken from the day.

We spent most of that day in the hospital, and Jamie had gone home to get Isla’s belongings packed. He decided to bring her suitcase and carry on with him back to the hospital for Isla to pick out her going home outfit.

She expressed her delight at finally having an opportunity to not wear her pajamas. It was a change as she loved wearing pajamas at home, but I supposed the effect was different when you weren’t allowed anything else.

Tomorrow was the day where our plane would carry us back across the pond to home. It was strange in a way as home never truly stopped being Jamie. I still very much thought of my house as my home, but it meant something different. It was where I built a home with my children to grow up happy and loved. I had thousands of memories in that house, just as I had thousands with Jamie. Jamie was where I felt safe, and if it weren’t for him I wouldn’t have the girls to make a home with.

I knew though I had to return home. My mother was watering my plants and feeding the girls’ fish I left behind in my haste to fly here. I had nearly forgotten in the abrupt aftermath of Isla’s accident, but luckily my mum never allowed a crisis to overwhelm her. She was cool and collected and managed to keep her hair on. I don’t know how she managed it, but Julia was a formidable woman.

The girls were on a FaceTime call with her at the moment, and I left them to their privacy. Jenny was driving back up the following day to take Isla and I to the airport. Bree was tagging along, not wanting to be far from us any second longer than she had to be.

I knew she was absolutely gutted we were leaving her here, but I knew Jamie would find ways to distract her from her sadness. It was difficult to picture a sad Bree, but it happened occasionally. She was normally such a bright ray of sunshine in an otherwise dreary sky. She radiated warm, joy, and hope.

I sat outside the room thinking about the day she was born. It was a much easier labor than the one with Isla or Gabriel. She actually went past her due date in a way that was entirely Bree. She was content to rest and soak up her remaining days inside of me.

She was supposed to arrive around the second week of November, but my darling girl didn’t make an appearance until November 23.

Let's burn like wildfire
Be lightning and thunder
Let's hold our breath
’Cause we're going under
Reckless and crazy
So we can always say
We were in it
For better or worse
We're gonna love until it hurts

November 23, 2008
I groaned as I readjusted the books in my lap. Jamie was watching Isla as I studied in the library. Technically I was supposed to stay off my feet, but my second pregnancy compared to my first one was a completely different experience.

The doctors had marked it as a high risk pregnancy because of the complications I had with Isla. Yet, there wasn’t a single difficulty aside from my morning sickness lasting well into my second trimester. Other than that, the baby inside me was calm. During the day, the baby kicked quite a bit, and Jamie was convinced we had a future football player. I indulged him with silly smiles.

I was so happy. I lucked out as the early and middle stages of the pregnancy were carried out during the summer time. I was absolutely huge, and couldn’t imagine carrying around my stomach during some of the hottest months of the whole year.

We decided not to find out the gender and allow it to be a surprise. Neither of us cared either way since we already had one precious miracle. Isla turned two the month before, and looking at her now, there was no way to tell she was ever premature. She had caught up to other children her age, and was actually quite advanced. There was an intelligence in her eyes that was slightly disarming. I started to teach her how to read the alphabet, and she recognized all of her letters. It was quite impressive, and imagined by the age of three I would have her reading books to herself.

I’d explained as much as I could to an almost two year old about the new baby. I showed her pictures in her books about mommies having babies. She then looked at my constantly growing bulge, pointed and said “da bee bee.” Then she placed her fingers back in her mouth and that was the end of the discussion.

I’m sure once the new baby arrived her reaction might be different. At the moment, I knew she couldn’t think in abstract terms. It would some years before her thinking transitioned from the concrete to the abstract.

I groaned at my aching back, but I needed to continue studying as I had a test coming up right after the thanksgiving break. There was a definite tightness in my lumbar muscles. I hadn’t considered the possibility I was in labor until my water broke in the library.

My eyes closed as I took deep, steady breaths to control the pain I was experiencing. It wasn’t anywhere near the level of what I had with Isla. So far, they were quite moderate and very far apart. I picked up my phone and typed in my passcode before clicking on Jamie’s name. “Sassenach? Did ye need anything while yer at the library?” He’d been so lovely and compassionate during my second pregnancy.

He occasionally bordered on hovering, and my hormones didn’t exactly agree with that. I snapped at him constantly when his presence irritated me, then cried immediately afterwards because I felt guilty. He went out whenever I had a craving even if it was at three in the morning and he had to get up at six for work.

“No,” a smile formed on my lips as I pictured him. “I’m going to drive over to the hospital.”

My obstetrician/gynecologist was located at the Brigham, and it was only a few minutes away from the campus. “Isla, is at the sitters and I’ll call to tell her the news.”

I knew he was trying not to panic, especially after what happened the last time. I tried to reassure him often how textbook this pregnancy was. It was more than a bit incredible actually, and I found myself immensely thankful.

By the time Jamie arrived at the hospital, I was already admitted. They’d put an id bracelet on me, and had one in place for Jamie and the baby as well. I was only five centimeters dilated when
he came rushing in with a flushed face and hair clinging to his temples.

I bit back my grin as I watched him come closer. His eyes were tender and excited, but I saw the nerves lingering on the edges. I grasped his hand and placed it on my stomach. The baby had started a few days ago transitioning in preparation for the birth, so I knew it couldn’t be much longer. They were already so stubborn like their father.

“Are ye okay Sassenach?” He clutched my hand tightly.

I stroked the back of his with my other hand. “I’m alright love. Dr. Heath has stated the labor is progressing nicely the last time she checked. If anything it should be quicker because it’s a second birth, but our baby doesn’t seem to want to come out.” The lines faded from his face, but I knew I didn’t ease all of his fears.

Two hours later he held my hand as I bore down with all of might and delivered a healthy baby. “It’s a girl,” Dr. Heath announced, her eyes bright and shiny. She’d also helped deliver Isla, and that was an altogether different sort of birth. It was a redemption for her as well.

The baby began to cry as they cleared her passageways. A nurse placed her on my stomach and I marveled at her. Isla was completely bald at birth, and when her hair finally started coming in, it was blonde. She also had bird like features because of how tiny she was, but her sister wasn’t at all.

Her sister had curly, bright, red hair that was matted down with birth matter. Her face was scrunched in annoyance at the sudden briskness in which she arrived. Her tiny body shivered at the cold as Jamie cut the chord and they carried her away to clean her up.

She returned all swaddled up in a yellow blanket and lowered into my arms. I marveled at her perfect features and saw bits of her sister in her once Isla put on weight. Her Apgar scores were high, and I released the breath I was holding. She was a full seven pounds and twenty inches long. “She’s going to be tall,” I informed Jamie as he stared down at her over my shoulder in total awe.

“Thank ye Sorcha, for blessing me with not only one lass but two.” His lips descended on mine. They were warm and pliant against my own. “She’s a beauty like her mother.” He leaned his head against mine and we watched as her mouth opened.

She began to root around and I knew the drill. I lowered my gown and brought her to my breast. I helped her latch on and she did the rest. “A breast man like her father,” I murmured softly.

Jamie grinned proudly and ran the pads of his fingers over her silky skin.

“Are we agreed on the name?” I asked him. He nodded and I glanced back down at her. “Brianna, welcome to the world.” We both wanted a way to honor his parents, and naming her second born after them was a good way to do it.

Their giggling ceased and I imagined my mother had to go. She’d been rather busy as of late and secretive, and I wondered if she was dating someone.

I reentered the room and found them sitting on the bed together. Their bodies were pressed tightly together, and I saw a few tears drop from both of their eyes. My own were flooded, but I didn’t want to cry anymore on this trip. There had been enough of that going around.
“Cheer up girls, there’s only a few weeks left. Bree, you and daddy will have loads of fun.” She sniffed disdainfully. I sighed as I took a seat beside the bed. “Bree, I know you want to go back home with us, but your dad would be absolutely gutted if you chose to do so. He would never say so because he knows how you feel, but he really wants you to stay and spend some time just you and him.”

She and her sister exchanged a silent conversation, and she reluctantly nodded her agreement. “But I don’t want to fly all the way home by myself.” I was prepared for the resultant whine.

“Your Uncle Tom has agreed to escort you home lovey.” Her face morphed into the biggest grin possible as she squealed.

“Are you for real serious mommy? That’s so awesome!”

“He has agreed to fly here and the two of you will actually take the train into London. You’ll spend the night there with him and your auntie before flying to Boston.”

I knew the news would get her excited. Isla shook her head at her sister’s antics, but there was a hint of smile on her lips. “Dork,” she muttered.

“Whatever, I’m going to London.” Bree stuck out her tongue. “So mommy I was thinking since Aunt Jenny is staying in our hotel with us tonight, why don’t Isla and I hangout with her while you and daddy go eat? Isla has been wanting to go to the movies.”

I didn’t miss the way they shared secretive glances, and I suspected they were up to no good. “I don’t know,” I hedged, not sure I should spend anymore time alone with Jamie. “Isla must be exhausted, and I’m not sure she’ll up to going to see a movie.”

“I feel fine mom, if there’s a problem Aunt Jenny and Auntie Melody will be there. Come on, you and dad have barely talked to each other since you’ve been here?” She pushed out her bottom lip and her sister mirrored her.

It was at that moment Jamie decided to finally make an appearance. I hadn’t seen him since the night before as he head errands to take care of at his business. “What’s going on here?” He asked upon seeing the girls’ expressions.

I knew how this was about to play out. The girls were master manipulators, but rarely got anything past me because I knew their tricks. I employed the same ones at their age.

Within minutes they had Jamie convinced and I essentially had no say. Isla was ruffling through her suitcase to find a suitable outfit to leave the hospital in. She chose her dress with the cherry print. It ended about mid-knee. She grabbed her jean jacket and her white converse as well. Her hair was in loose waves as she’d worn it in a braid her entire stay.

I was at the nurses’ station working on her discharge paperwork when Jamie settled beside me. “Ye dinna have to actually do anything with me. I know the girls want it, but yer welcome to tell them to mind their own business.” I felt the intensity of his eyes on me, but refused to look at him. I wasn’t prepared to confront everything that went on inside my head and my heart. I felt so many conflicting feelings for the man, the father of my children and my ex. I exhaled slowly and raised my eyes from the papers. “It’s fine Jamie. It’ll make their night, and besides I’ll be lonely otherwise. They’ve already made plans.” I pouted playfully for him to show I was okay with the situation.

I had a sense of uneasiness, but I didn’t linger on it.
Jenny and Melody were waiting in the car park for us. They were chatting and smiling, and I could only imagine what it was all about. I rolled Isla’s suitcase in front of me as Jamie pushed the wheelchair. He picked her up gently and lowered into the backseat. She could walk, and her incisions were healing fine. The doctors preferred she not strain herself too much though.

Kisses and hugs were exchanged as we parted ways. A part of me wished I was going with them. “I wondered if ye mind if I cooked for you tonight.”

I blinked at him unseeingly as I processed his words. I wasn’t positive I wanted to know where he lived. It would make it that much easier to picture him and to think about him in those moments where I pretended I didn’t.

He noticed my hesitation and I dropped my head to my chest. Was I ready for this? We still had some things to work out, and if I refused his offer, I knew what it meant for the rest of the night. “Okay,” I finally said.

You and me together wrapped around forever
I’m never going to let you go
Our worlds spinning around us
Where we can’t be found
You’re the only thing I want to know
When it feels like fighting and trying
When it looks like falling hear me calling

I tried to ignore the butterflies that erupted inside of my stomach at his radiant smile. His whole face lit up at my mere agreement to dinner at his place.

“So when are ye due back at work?” I knew he was attempting to prevent an awkward silence from settling.

“Oh, I mumbled. I didn’t want to go on the defensive because there was a good chance he didn’t mean any offense. “Well sometimes other teammates of Bree’s take her to the tournaments. The girls spend a lot of their weekends at friends’ houses for sleepovers. We do a carpool in the mornings, so my mum picks up some of their classmates. Then another parent will take the kids home or keep them.” I laughed. “It’s a system we’ve worked out, and it benefits all of our busy schedules.”

I saw him purse his lips before licking them nervously. Somehow his next question made him feel
anxious. “Is it hard?”

“What? Raising them?” He grunted in agreement unable to vocalize. “Well at first sure,” I admitted to him. “I had the summer to sort of prepare myself, but it was during the next semester of med school where I had to figure it all out on my own. Let me tell you, raising an almost one and three year old is perhaps one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.” I didn’t regret having them. In his absence, they reminded me he was real and once mine. They made the whole separation and subsequent divorce easier. “Do I wish you were there? All the time.” I told him truthfully.

I didn’t want him to think for a second I wanted him across the Atlantic. There were many days I wished he was beside me, helping me with the girls but also just with me. Those months following his move were hard and stressful.

I had a complete nervous breakdown, resulting in my mother signing me into the psych ward for 72 hours while she took care of the girls. I slept most of the time I was there aside from when they made me talk to a therapist. When I was released, they set me up with a therapist who helped me immensely.

I was finally able to voice those feelings that escaped my notice. We talked and talked until eventually I didn’t need her as much. I figured out my own problems and I had enough tools to know how to solve them without becoming overly worked up.

“Why do ye think we let it fall apart easily?” His dark eyes flickered in my direction, and I shifted uncomfortably.

It wasn’t the question because I sort of figured out those answers. It was the shade of blue in his eyes. It reminded me of our youth and the seriousness he carried around inside of him. Whenever he got that glint in his eyes, clothes were generally shed.

I wet my lips and took a deep breath. “Well first and foremost we were dumb. We got married because we wanted to, but also it seemed inevitable. It wasn’t exactly the smartest idea either because the most stressful part of our lives was yet to come.”

“And then we had a baby before we knew it. I love Isla with all of my heart, but it wasn’t the right time for us to have a baby. I’m not sure there is a right time, but we were already showing signs of not communicating with one another. I’ll admit I deserve a large portion of the blame, and I freely assign it to myself.”

I shut him out long before he allowed a work colleague to flirt with him. I didn’t actually blame him for that then or now. It fueled the ire I had directed at him, but I always had insecurity in relation to him. He never noticed it, but I saw how other females looked at him. Then their eyes landed on me and I saw how they didn’t approve of me as a suitable match for him. It stung. I tried to be worthy of him in both brains and looks, but I couldn’t always satisfy both.

His removed his hand from the steering wheel to cover mine and offer support. I was touched by the gesture as we hadn’t defined what we were aside from being parents. “Ye ken very well ye were not the only one who fucked up. We were young and ye had school. I had my job. Then we had the girls. We stopped talking and listening because we were yelling. We tried to drown one another in our own superiority.” I didn’t disagree with his assessment of the situation. “I cared more about winning an argument than yer feelings afterwards. I ignored when ye cried, and went out with my work colleagues.”

I blinked back tears because I hadn’t thought about it in years. I hated how insignificant he made me feel and how I convinced myself it was my fault he was unhappy. I dragged him to a country he would’ve never lived in if he hadn’t met me, and he was living in misery. We both were.
“I forgave you.” My voice was choked with emotion. “It took a long time and loads of therapy, but I was culpable too. I didn’t attempt to stop the fight, and I instigated quite a few myself. I want you to know I’m sorry. I was sorry then not just in the present when I have hindsight to show me how wrong I was. I ached to tell you, but my pride refused to allow you to win.” I closed my eyes and leaned back into the seat. “They were hollow victories believe me.”

I recalled staring into my face in the mirror. I hardly recognized the person who stared back. Her eyes were lifeless and dull. There were large, dark circles around her eyes. Her lips were downturned, and she appeared as if she lost the fight and zest for life. It was hard to believe I had become her.

At our wedding, I promised Jamie we would change together. We would grow and become these new people who still loved one another. Yet, we failed. I failed.

Before the conversation continued, we pulled into the driveway of a tasteful looking detachable home. Jamie ran around to my side of the car and opened the door for me with a tilt of his lips. He offered his hand and I took it. Our fingers wove together, and the connection clicked back on.

I’d always felt a gentle tingle on my skin when he touched me. It made me feel alive and desired. He unlocked the door and I walked into his home. The floors were wood like mine.

Photos peppered the walls leading to the kitchen. Some were of the girls and others were his nieces and nephews. Then there were pictures of him, his siblings, and his parents. Jamie had never been one for decorating, and I surmised it was his sister who picked the furniture for the place.

He led me into the kitchen which was nice, but made me miss my own. He began to dig out ingredients to make some sort of pasta. He was intent and focused as he filled the pot with water and set it on the stove, as he cut up veggies, as he mixed in herbs. It was honestly quite erotic watching him get domestic.

“I want to tell ye something.” I quirked a brow as I stared curiously at him. “It’s not the first time I’ve met yer friend Melody.” My face was more than likely all scrunched up in perplexity. I hadn’t met her until after he moved away and I started my residency. There was a good year between the two events. “There was another visit in 2011. I found myself unable to stay away any longer and I came before Christmas.”

I was not comprehending what he was saying. I would’ve known if he had returned.

He poured some vinegar into the salad he was tossing. “I dinna ken ye weren’t home, but I had yer address from yer mam. Yer friend Melody was there and we chatted. It was after she left and I looked around yer house, I realized how much I missed. Ye created this whole life for yerself, and I dinna want to ruin it.”

Our eyes met across the counter and I broke. I wept into my hands because Jamie thought I had a life without him. It took a longtime before I had anything resembling a life because I couldn’t bear my existence without him. “If you had stayed, I promise you wouldn’t have ruined anything. I was close to cracking and ringing you. I wanted you back desperately, but I couldn’t do it to you either.” He lowered my hands from my face. “We are quite a pair.”

Under his smoldering gaze, I felt an acute dampness in my panties. If we allowed ourselves to get there tonight, it would create several problems. I still hadn’t figured out the situation with Peter, or the one with Jamie. Sex was easy, but when there were emotions involved it was complicated. I didn’t want to hurt anyone. Peter didn’t deserve that, neither did Jamie.
I was the one who needed to get my shit together. He plated the pasta and put the salads in bowls before carrying them to the table. He grabbed a bottle of white, and I knew the night would get interesting.

Let's burn like wildfire
Be lightning and thunder
Let's hold our breath
'Cause we're going under
Reckless and crazy
So we can always say
We were in it
For better or worse
We're gonna love until it hurts

The food was delicious, but Jamie was always a marvelous cook. It was one of the benefits to having a husband who knew his way around the kitchen. He enjoyed it as a hobby, and usually had dinner ready by the time I arrived home.

Later, towards the end, he stopped coming home early to cook. It was when he lost his passion for cooking I knew there was no turning back. Something broke.

I sipped my wine as we exchanged stories. We weren’t delving into the past, which allowed me the necessary breather. It was suffocating to think and constantly discuss. I didn’t want to remain stuck there forever. If we kept our minds firmly there, we could never face the future.

“It was Bree’s second Christmas, and she was still knew to the whole present thing. Isla kept hiding her presents when she turned her head. She would place them back under the tress. Bree frowned and then reached for the same present again. It went on for about ten minutes before I put a stop to it.”

“What do ye usually get them?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek as I thought about the sorts of things I purchased. “We have a tradition where the girls receive a new pair of pajamas. It’s a surprise so I set on their beds while they shower. It varies year to year based on their lists and what I think they need. Last year they both received iPads. Thirty minutes before bedtime, they have to bring me their tablets for the night. I place it on their dressers the next morning. Bree got a new bike. Her last one was stolen because she didn’t chain it. Isla got a new bed.” I shrugged my shoulders. I preferred to get my children items they would actually use. “Neither of them play with dolls often anymore. We donated most of their dolls and old toys. I buy them clothes.”

“Do ye think I can visit this year for Christmas?”

I didn’t know how much I wanted him to until that very moment. I knew he felt uncomfortable around me and I him in the years since our divorce, but I would’ve never begrudged him any holiday. Hogmanay happened to work out this year, and I sent the girls.

I set my fork down and focused on him. “Jamie, you are welcome to visit them anytime. I don’t want you to feel as if I’m some sort of obstacle to overcome.”

The laughter began as he told me stories about his employees. It was incredible he built such a business for himself. He was always good at taking an opportunity and making something out of it. Soon our plates were cleared, pans soaked in the sink, and we sat inches apart.

“I shouldn’t indulge,” I told him as my eyes fixated on the chocolate cake.
A dangerous gleam appeared in his eyes. He picked off a piece and placed it at my lips. They opened for him of their own accord, and soon enough most, gooey chocolate cake was on my tongue. I savored the taste and slowly chewed. He swiped some icing off the top and traced my lips with it before covering them with his.

Before I knew it, our lips were eager and fast. Our tongues met somewhere in the middle and tangled languidly together. I tasted the chocolate on his tongue and moaned loudly. My hands tangled in his hair as I pulled him closer.

He pulled back. “Claire are ye sure about this?” His voice was breathy and sexy, and dear lord I wanted him.

“So much,” I admitted out loud.

He pulled me up and into his arms. “Then let’s go to my room.” He grabbed my hand and I followed him up the stairs. I wanted him and only him. I need him like the air I breathed, and I was tired of denying myself. For once, I would take what he offered and worry about the morning when it came.

Let's burn like wildfire
Be lightning and thunder
Let's hold our breath
'Cause we're going under
Reckless and crazy
So we can always say
We were in it
For better or worse
We're gonna love until it hurts

Gonna love...

Chapter End Notes

I have the next chapter ready and waiting. Please don't hate me. Thank you all for the love and appreciation you have for this story. It means a lot to me as I've learned like Claire and Jamie what happens when you don't take an opportunity when it's offered.
Down In Flames

Chapter Summary

Everything you want and don't want.

Chapter Notes

Here it is. The chapter is split almost right in half between their POVs. The two songs for this chapter are Reignite (Knox Brown Gallant) and Down In Flames (Ella Vos).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

My only weakness
You know all my secrets
I can't stop loving you (I can't stop loving you)
Your kiss is the sweetest
You look like magic
One touch and I've had it
I can't stop wanting you (I can't stop wanting you)

JPOV

The candles lit in my room illuminated the paleness of her skin. I drew her closer and my nose brushed up against the satiny skin of her shoulders. It had been so long since I touched her in an intimate way. We shared a few kisses and a couple of handholds over the last several days, but this was a different sort of intimacy. It was deeper and meant something neither of us could take back.

I heard the huge intake of breath as our bodies connected. She didn’t push me away, and I took it as a positive sign she wanted this as much as I did. I didn’t actually expect her to either. I knew the minute her tongue connected with mine, she was lost to whatever existed between us. We were two souls consumed by an almost twenty year love. She ran her hands the length of my back, my name falling from her lips. “Jamie,” she moaned breathily, her breath tickling my ear.

I planted kisses along her collarbone and possibly nibbled a bit or a lot. She encouraged my actions by tilting her head more to provide my lips better access to her soft, creamy, delectable skin. I wanted to mark her, to show her I’m the only one who will ever make her feel this in her life. I wanted her to walk around with my mouth on her body as evidence of who she belonged with.

I pulled back to allow her the opportunity to object and push me away because as much as I wanted her, I didn’t want her to regret this moment. She didn’t deserve that at all and neither did I, no matter how much our souls called out for one another.

Her eyes were bright and alive as she stared at me. I paused as I realized in this lighting, they had become the golden color I was fond of that rarely showed except in moments we shared like this.
Her lips had the hint of a coy smile. Up close, I saw all the tiny freckles across the bridge of her nose and underneath her eyes. My lips descended and placed soft kisses first on her eyelids and moving my way down her nose until I reached her plump, soft lips. They were already swollen from the kissing we had done.

I started with the top before switching to the bottom and then covering her lips with my own. She returned my kiss and there was a sudden urgency to move to the bed. I backed her up and she fell with a thump onto the mattress. She looked up at me through hooded eyes. I could see the desire as plain as day.

I stared at her through half closed eyes. There was something sensual in her actions. “I want to undress ye myself,” I told her. I gently lowered myself to a kneeling position in front of her. Her eyes followed my every movement.

I kissed her as my hands moved to the edges of her shirt. I tugged gently and she relented. There was so much skin exposed to me. Her creamy breasts were revealed to me in all of their beauty. I smirked at the silky, lacy black bra she wore underneath her blouse. It amazed me such a woman was the mother of my children.

“Sorcha,” I breathed against her skin. They were bigger than I remembered, but she had also carried children and aged. “You’re beautiful.” I knew if I stared too long she would become self-conscious and try to cover herself.

There was no room for insecurity tonight. I nipped playfully at her neck and moved my way down to her twin mounds. I couldn’t decide whether or not to use my hands or my mouth so I used both. While I lavished attention on one with my mouth, I gently squeezed and teased the peak of the other. “Jamie, please,” she begged me for more.

I reached behind her to unclasp the contraption. While the color was delectable against her pale skin, I wanted to see all of her. I wanted nothing separating us as we gave ourselves to each other again.

“You’re wearing too much,” she said before impatiently pulling up my shirt. I saw her tongue swipe across her lips, and I captured them once again with my own. Her tongue slid against mine, and we both released a moan as they tangled together. I felt her breasts against my chest and leaned over her to push her onto the bed. We were pressed firmly together as our lips and hands worked in tandem.

“Tell me ye want me, only me,” I whispered against her mouth. I needed her and perhaps I always had. I needed to know she needed me as well. It wasn’t just sex between us.

She was feeling the same thing. “Just you, only you, no one else.” It was all I needed as I peeled her pants down the length of her legs. My own soon joined hers on the floor.

The only thing separating us from being one were my boxers and her panties if you could call the scrap of lace underwear. As I suckled at her breasts, my palm traveled lower to her thighs where she trembled at my touch. She gasped my name as my fingers moved in slow circles, teasing her,
readying her for what was to come. My hand skimmed over her panties, and I felt the heat of her sex.

She was wet, and the warmth emanating from her was killing me. Claire was still aroused by me, which pleased me more than anything we’d done tonight already. She jumped a bit as my fingers pushed aside the fabric to gain access to her opening. Her hips shot off the bed as my fingers pushed through her thatch of curls and reached their destination. Her thighs opened granting me further access to her body.

Her eyes shone with trust and love. Neither of us would say the last one, but we knew it was true. It was the only reason to explain why we were here. If there wasn’t love between us, we wouldn’t risk it for a rump in the fields.

Oh after all this time,
I wanna make you mine
I wanna reignite our love
Still after all this time
Sent shivers up my spine
Darling I can't give up on love
Oh let me reignite our love

She held her breath as I divested her of the last layer separating us. Before me was Claire, and she was unfolding like a flower. Her nipples were a nice rosy pink. Her stomach was flat, and there were thin silver lines. They were the last of the evidence she carried children, my children, our children.

It made me harder to think no one else knew what she looked like fully ripe, naked, and pregnant with our child. They didn’t know what it was like to make love to her when her breasts were full and her stomach round as she lost all control around me. I remembered how she tightened almost painfully around me, and I released into her no longer able to hold back.

My lips lowered to her stomach, and her fingers ran through my curls. I could feel as the taut muscles tightened under my mouth. I planted open mouthed kisses down her body until I reached the apex of her thighs. I could smell her arousal, and from the way Claire watched me, I knew my eyes had darkened to a deeper blue. She said it was her favorite shade of blue.

I brushed my nose against the softness of her creamy thighs. “Jamie, love me, please.” There was no time for foreplay as I brushed my tongue against her clit. A moan escaped her lips as her body jerked up.

I knew how to make her come, and I wanted to see her in all of her glory as I did it. It was a sweet, tanginess as I circled my tongue around her clit before taking it between my lips and firmly sucking. She cried out, followed by a desperate keening of “oh God.”

I thrust my fingers inside and her hips flew off the bed as she screamed loudly. It was hard and fast. Her thighs wrapped around my head and tightened as I felt her reaching her high. The muscles rippled and trembled until she clamped down around my fingers, and I felt her body spasm. Her eyes fluttered shut as she pulsed around me. Wetness flowed into my mouth, and I tasted the sweetness of her for the first time in nine years. I heard her heavy breathing as she came back down to earth. Her hands tugged gently at my hair, wanting me to join her.

I slid up her body and fell into her whiskey eyes. My erection rubbed against her hip more than once as I explored her skin once again. I thought it was a treasure once lost to me, and now I was like a starving man. I nipped, sucked, and kissed my way up to her mouth. She reached down to begin the process of removing my boxers. When there was nothing between us, she tenderly
grabbed my length. Her forefinger and thumb circled the tip, and then she slid her hand in an upward and downward motion. Her thumb swirled around my swollen head and I dipped forward unable to control myself as I moaned loudly in her ear.

I positioned myself at her entrance. Our eyes connected, and it was as if our souls called out for one another. She nodded her head to confirm she wanted nothing more for us than to be joined together.

\[
\text{I wanna touch you} \\
\text{I'm not here to judge you} \\
\text{Just take what you want from me} \\
\text{And let me indulge you}
\]

There was no going back as my erection slipped past her folds. Our fingers weaved together as I was suddenly surrounded by heat and tightness. My lips connected with hers at the moment of our joint union and we groaned into the kiss. I stilled myself inside of her as I didn’t want to release too soon. I wanted it to be pleasurable for her as well, and I needed to take my time. I was already quite worked up from what we had already done.

Her mouth was hot against my neck as her tongue lapped playfully around my skin. A nip of her teeth caused me to jerk inside of her. She pumped her hips against mine, and I caught the hint. I slowly started to move, pushing in and out, teasing her as I sunk inside of her warm walls. She threw her leg around my hip, providing me better access to her. Her walls clenching around me, and I redirected my attention by burying my face in her neck to control myself. I wanted this to last as long as possible.

We were caught somewhere in heaven and hell as I gave a quick and deep thrust. It was hard to believe we were together after all the time between us. Here we were, eighteen years after we met and almost nine after our divorce, and the connection we shared was still intact. It was as if her body and soul were still mine to know and keep.

My eyes slammed shut as I lost myself in her silky, hot, wet walls. Every time I entered her, I felt the clenching and unclenching of her muscles and it was almost my undoing. Her fingers squeezed at my bottom, urging me to move faster. I buried my face in her hair as I obliged her wishes. I smelled the vanilla scent of her shampoo and the tea she constantly drank. I was home with her, in her, and I didn’t want to lose the feeling. I saw in her eyes she knew our souls were reconnecting, joining, becoming one once again. We were a whole.

I pulled all the way out and her molten gold eyes were on me. A pout formed on her lips until I pushed back in, exhaling. We established a steady rhythm as I slowly pulled almost all the way out before sinking back in again. Her throaty moans and groans caused my balls to tighten in anticipation of my release.

Her eyes were focused on where our bodies joined, watching as I thrust into her. She had always enjoyed watching us together as we lost control. Her hips raised repeatedly to meet my downstroke, and I drove back in so deep I felt myself press up against her cervix. She stroked my hair as we continued to take joy and love from one another.

\[
\text{I can't stop loving you} \\
\text{I can't stop needing you} \\
\text{I can't stop wanting you} \\
\text{There ain't nobody} \\
\text{I can't say no to you} \\
\text{Darling you're living proof} \\
\text{Right in the depths of my soul you will stay}
\]
My pace quickened as I continued to drive into her. I felt her hand move between us, and her breath came in little pants. I nudged her fingers aside and took over and applied the right amount of pressure as her eyes flew open. Her hips rotated against my quickening hand. She bit down on her lip, and I sensed she was close. Her face was flushed with passion. It would take a few more strokes, and we would reach our peaks together if I timed it right.

Her legs fully wrapped around my hips, her ankles locked, giving me a better angle to dive in. My fingers were soaked with her warm juices. Her whimpers were louder and uncontrolled as she threw her head back in ecstasy. “There Jamie, oh God- oh God, right there” she gasped.

“Claire, only for you,” I breathed into the hollow of her neck. She grasped my face and her eyes stared into mine, searching for something, and seemed to find it. My breathing was fast and labored, and I nearly caused my bottom lip to bleed.

I kissed her and sank my tongue into her sweet mouth. Her tongue tangled languidly with mine as our bodies continued to rock together. Her muscles clenched tightly as her body tensed in preparation. She clamped down on me like a vice, and I felt the fluttery contractions of her release. As she came down from her high, I pitched forward unable to hold it back and spilled my seed into her. My cock pulsated as I released all of my pent up frustration and love for the woman beneath me. We held onto each other, our bodies slick with sweat. I stayed inside her as long as I could, enjoying the feeling of her wrapped around me.

I had come home after such a long time. “I love you,” I whispered into the hollow of her neck.

“I know,” she replied as she played with my curls.

It hit me what happened. She was in a relationship, yet fell into bed with me. She was leaving tomorrow to go back to a man who hadn’t hurt her as much as I had. A man who could provide her a new start and one who might father future children of hers.

I tentatively pulled out of her, both of us moaning at the sensation. I rolled over to stare at her before pulling her closer to me. She pressed her back into me. Despite the size difference, her body fit perfectly against my own. God had seen fit to make us for one another.

She pulled my right arm over her body and twined our fingers together. “I missed this.” She admitted. My arms wrapped tightly around her, hoping if I held on she would never leave my embrace. “I don’t mean the sex, although that’s wonderful too. I meant the connection. You’re so aware of my body and what I need. I feel as if our souls join together each time our bodies do.” I knew what she meant, but it was nice to have her confirm it as well.

Claire struggled to reveal her feelings. I knew part of it came from her father dying when she was young, but the other half was she felt insecure. It made her feel vulnerable to tell people her secrets and thoughts. If others knew what was going on inside, they could use it against you. She worked in a mostly male dominated field, and for her she couldn’t afford to let those sorts of things affect her. She was far from a cold fish, but she was good at hiding what bothered her. One of her catch phrases was “I’m fine.”

She was a puzzle. It took me years to fit the correct pieces together to figure her out. She didn’t make it easy, but I was patient and determined to know what made her tick. Even now all these
later, I was constantly peeling layers back like an onion.

“Sassenach, I was lying to myself for the last nine years. I truly thought we were better without each other. I’ve caused ye so much pain and suffering to last more than a lifetime. Yet, I ken no woman is made for me like you.” I wanted to reveal my soul to her. She needed to know there would never be another for me.

I simply couldn’t love another woman like I did her. As surprising as it was, my love was taken the day I sat on a train. My heart was given away before I even knew. I had yet to take it back, and I didn’t want it back. She had all of me and always would.

I heard her snuffle and pictured her wet cheeks and red nose. She rolled over to face me and propped her head up on her elbow. Her brown eyes were soft and loving, but I sensed she was going to say something I wouldn’t like.

“The problem is I can’t move. This is your home Jamie.” Her lips were downturned as if understanding I belonged somewhere not with her. “Boston has become mine. I have a career where I’m actually in line for chief of cardio in a few years. I’ve worked too hard and for so long, and it’s one of the best hospitals. What about the girls? All of this would confuse them.” Her eyes were moist as she posed her next question. “What are we?”

I sputtered because I was speechless. I hadn’t thought of anything beyond us being together for this night. She was going home in the morning, and I couldn’t be the one to ask her to stay. I had seen her as she studied fastidiously in medical school while raising children. She was a single parent as she made her way through her residency. It was her dream come true, and I couldn’t stand in her way.

Every weekend we hitchhike to hell
And you only think ’bout yourself

I must’ve taken too long because she had already made up her mind about what would happen.

“We’ve rushed into this before, and while I hold no regrets about the past anymore, I can’t go headlong into the unknown. There’s so much at risk. We were young then, and only had ourselves to worry about. Marriage was the next logical step.” She was reverting to her clinical side. “We live an ocean apart and can we just enjoy the moment before airplanes and oceans part us again?” Her eyes begged me to understand and I did.

I saw her point, which caused an ache to form in my chest. “You’re right. I will always love you, but for all intents and purposes we are almost strangers. I’ve been clinging to who you were, but you’re also more than her. I don’t know this new Claire as well as my Claire. Our souls may cry out for one another, but it’s hard to bring them back together after we’ve created separate lives apart.” Mostly I was telling her what she wanted to hear, and not what I felt.

If she knew the truth depths of my soul, she would weep to know how much I wanted her with me always. Any version of Claire was my Claire. I would accept her no matter what.

She kissed my chest, her lips warm against my cooling skin. My arms wrapped around her and we laid there soon drifting off. The morning would come and Claire would be going home.

If we’re going down, we’re going down in flames
Flyin’ round the highway, tryna get away
Don’t speak, I’ll try to save us from ourselves
If were going down, we’re going down in flames
Going down in flames
For now, I would enjoy everything she offered. We were having the goodbye we denied ourselves nine years ago because of bitterness, grief, anger, and total heartbreak. We weren’t ready for all of the challenges life brought. Through the years, Claire made herself stronger and healed herself. While her heart took longer, she managed to let someone inside. I couldn’t let her destroy her relationship.

Tonight would remain ours and then she would be his.

Two hours later, a thigh slid over mine and I found her hovering above me. She smelled of sex and me, and her hair was a bit ruffled. It fell forward in a dark curtain, preventing the moon from bathing her in its milky glow. She didn’t look like Dr. Fraser or mommy, but like Claire, my Sassenach, the girl embarrassed because she fell into a stranger’s lap.

She sank down onto me and took me inside of her. We made love again as she cried out above me. Her breasts pressed into my face as I took a nipple between my lips. It was slow and lazy as we took things we couldn’t promise from each other.

We were shifting and sliding against each other, and I felt the world shattering around me. No one else existed except for the two of us as I marked her skin. She reached her climax quickly and I followed not long after. I swallowed her cries with my lips and savored the taste of her. I saved it to my memory because I never wanted to forget.

I watched as her face relaxed and smoothed, her cheeks pink with exertion and release. She fell on top of me in a heap, and we drifted off to sleep with me still firmly inside of her.

I pressed my lips to her hair and kept her in the cocoon of my arms.

The predawn light woke me, and my heart cracked at the absence of her warm body next to me. I heard the sound of the shower running in my bathroom, and immediately I knew what she was doing. She was avoiding what happened between us last night, or at least attempting to distance herself from what we did.

It was a classic Claire tactic. If she wanted to avoid a situation, she figured out her way around it. I recalled several times during our relationship pre-marriage and during where she carefully detracted from a topic or ignored me altogether when she couldn’t handle what was happening.

In a way, I knew she wasn’t protecting only herself but me. She was drawing a line that should’ve remained firmly uncrossed during her visit here, and somehow as usual we were drawn together like magnets.

I thought about the murky, dark waters of the Atlantic that separated us. There was such a wide expanse, and neither of us was fully willing to cross it. In the past, it was such a simple decision. I followed because my heart called out to hers. Then we didn’t know what we had the potential to lose because we were caught up in our youthful folly.

_Burning on your tongue_
_Every minute_
_We were too young_
_Couldn’t see it_

When she emerged from the bathroom, I suppressed a smile. Her hair hung in loose waves around her face as she buttoned up her blouse. As soon as she arrived home, she was scheduled to work a shift. Her mother would pick her and Isla up from the airport before depositing Claire off at the hospital. She had used all of her sick days and some of her vacation time to make the trip. She couldn’t afford to take any time off if she wanted to still take a holiday with the girls before the
start of school in August.

Her face was unreadable as she noticed my awake status. She hesitated in the doorway and appeared to consider her options. She inhaled harshly and exhaled through her nose as she took a seat on the edge of my bed, far from me.

I missed the warmth of her body, but I would play by her rules. I knew it was difficult for her and myself, and I wanted to ease myself back into life post-Claire.

She pushed air through her lips and met my eyes. Hers were a contradiction of emotions. There was desire on different levels. The desire to stay, the desire to be with me, and the desire to make it work between us. Then there was the hesitation. She was unable to make big steps like that. Her whole life she carefully planned. She couldn’t be spontaneous outside of our bedroom escapades because she preferred order. She thrived on knowing exactly what was going to happen.

There was love and a wariness I had grown used to seeing. All of it swirled in her brown depths, and above all was confusion about how we progressed from here.

I sighed and ran a shaky hand through my hair. “Claire,” I spoke softly, it came out more like a lover’s caress. “I don’t regret last night. I’m not naïve. There’s no expectations about what last night meant, what it didn’t mean. I’m not going to pop down on one knee and declare my ever lasting love for you.”

Her cheeks tinged pink and I noted the spiking of her anxiety. The atmosphere of the room seemed to change. You could cut the tension with a sword.

Every weekend we hitchhike to hell
And you only think ’bout yourself

I shifted closer to her and snatched her hand from the mattress. I stared at the long, dexterous fingers. Flashes of the night before entered my brain as I recalled how our fingers intertwined. Her hands were engulfed by my large ones. I always enjoyed watching how our hands fit together perfectly. Her small one grasping my larger one.

“I do want to make something clear.” She hummed and glanced up from where our hands sat in my lap. “You’re like gravity to me. You keep me grounded. My whole universe is you and the girls, but I’m willing to let you go.” She leaned towards me and kissed away stray tears. “Deep down though I want you with me.”

Her gaze was tender and loving when she pulled back. “It seems we can never get our timing right,” she chuckled without humor.

I smiled sadly. “No, but don’t regret last night.” I begged her.

“I don’t.” She planted a parting kiss on my lips. Her phone buzzed on the nightstand and she moved away to grab it. Her eyes pooled as she glanced up at me. “Jenny’s here. I’ve asked her to take me and Isla to the airport. Mel is meeting us there.” I understood the hidden meaning in her words.

She wanted to separate herself and prevent any heartfelt gestures that would mean something more. My fingers brushed her cheek and she turned her face into my touch. “Jamie,” she whimpered, tears streaming down her face.

I kissed her forehead and helped her gather her belongings. It wouldn’t do to put off the inevitable and she had a flight to catch. Before she walked out the door I caught her by the hand and tugged her towards me. I hungrily captured her lips, sinking my tongue into her mouth, tracing the roof,
memorizing the taste of her. She moaned as our tongues played their own game of tag.

Her hand pushed me back as we both were left breathless. I brought her hand to my lips and pressed a kiss. I wanted her to remember the touch of me.

We went outside where Jenny sat in the driveway. Bree and Isla were in the back of the car. Bree looked as if someone kicked her puppy, and my heart ached for my baby girl. The last two weeks were the closest she ever had to something resembling two parents doing stuff with her together, at least in her memory.

She was arguably quite upset, but she was putting on a brave face. I opened the backdoor to give Isla a fierce hug. I tried to be gentle and mindful of her existing injuries. While she appeared to have healed quite a bit since her accident, I didn’t want to risk causing her any excess pain. “I love you dad,” she kissed my cheek. “Don’t worry about mom.” She whispered in my ear. “You did good, and she’ll come to her senses.”

I stared wordlessly at her and she winked. I was terrified about what my daughter had learned in school all of a sudden. I thought she was attending a Catholic school. They preach and teach abstinence, and I didn’t like the knowledge my daughter knew about sex or that she knew when people did have sex.

“Have a good flight sweetheart, and ring when you get home.” She nodded and sent me a glittering smile. “I love ye.”

I nodded at Bree who was seeing her mother and sister off at the airport before Jenny dropped her back round. It would be the first time I would be alone with Bree since she was an infant. Although back then it wasn’t much as I usually had Isla with me as well. There were a few midnight feedings of just the two of us.

If we're going down, we're going down in flames
Flyin' round the highway, tryna get away
Don't speak, I'll try to save us from ourselves
If were going down, we're going down in flames
Going down in flames

Claire’s glassy orbs met mine. “You’ve got to go or ye’ll miss yer flight.” She nodded but made no attempt to move. Jenny watched us with sharp eyes, warning me not to do anything. “Go on,” I opened the door for her and she hesitantly slid in.

“Goodbye Jamie,” she whispered softly.

I choked back a cry as I watched her struggle. I meant what I said when I told her I didn’t regret making love to her. I could never regret something that made me feel so good and whole. That’s what she did to me. She made me feel like a whole person. Jenny waved as she pulled out the driveway and began her trek to the airport.

I covered my face, trying to tamp down the urge to chase after them. I couldn’t do that. Claire didn’t need that from me. She needed me to stay here.

I went back inside, but I was too wired and upset to go back to sleep. It was hard to be in my house now without seeing her everywhere. I saw her in the kitchen where we shared glasses of wine. I saw her on the kitchen table where we made out. The wall outside my bedroom, I pressed myself fully into her and she wrapped her legs eagerly around my waist. We shared a few passionate kisses before entering the bedroom.
My sheets smelled of her and our coupling. I wasn’t going to change them until her scent faded. I needed something tangible to remind she was there.

CPOV

I watched as he disappeared from the rearview mirror. I wiped away my tears with my arm and turned towards the window to avoid Jenny’s gaze. She meant well, but she would ask far too many questions.

She’d never approved of the decisions Jamie and I made, and called us idiots on a number of occasions for how poorly we handled the end of our marriage.

The girls were silent and melancholic in the backseat, and my heart went out to them. They’d never spent more than a weekend apart in their entire lives. The next three weeks would be agonizing for them as they tried to figure out how to not be around one another. I knew for as much as they fought, they fiercely loved one another. Isla was Bree’ biggest defender.

It would also be a strange situation for me as well. Bree was staying in Scotland, and not coming home with Isla and myself.

All of remained in our own heads for the rest of the car ride. Jenny parked in short-term parking as she and Bree would escort us in and walk with us as far as security allowed. Melody was already there at check-in when we arrived.

Her blonde hair was thrown up into a casual bun, and she was dressed in a Boston hoodie and jeans. Bree ran ahead and threw her arms around her. I knew Bree was struggling with the idea of separation from not only me but her sister. If she didn’t have one of us, she usually had the other.

Melody played with the ends of Bree’s braid. “Hey kiddo,” she attempted to cajole my daughter who wasn’t having it. “Come on Bree, it’s only a few weeks. Then we will spend sometime on the beach at the Vineyard.” Her little red head pulled back slightly and I imagined there were tears.

“Promise?” Her voice croaked out. She held out her pinky.

Melody smiled at her cuteness because Bree was still a little girl underneath it all. “I pinky promise.” They swung their pinkies together basking in these little moments left to us.

My monkey unwrapped herself from her pseudo aunt before clinging to me. I leaned down to kiss her head and inhaled the scent of kid’s shampoo. “Awe Bree, mummy promises it’ll only be a few weeks more. You’ll spend the rest of the time with your dad. That’ll be fun, right?”

Her face was miserable as she shrugged her shoulders. “I guess.”

“You can call whenever you’d like sweetheart. The time will fly before you know it and then you’ll be back in my arms.”

Her blue eyes glistened as she refused to cry. I knew she was keeping a tight wrap on her emotions, and I hated the situation we were all facing. There wasn’t anything to be done about because I had to go back to work.

Isla was going to see the same physical therapist she saw when she injured her shoulder playing field hockey. Her physical therapy this time around would have an increase in the intensity as
there was much more to heal. I wasn’t overly worried. On those days, she would travel with me to
the hospital and spend two hours there before my mother would pick her up and take her home.

However, my heart ached for my young daughter as she would inevitably miss summer
conditioning for field hockey. I timed our vacation right so that the girls would have a week to
readjust to the time difference. I’d already sent an email to the coach who assured me Isla would
have a place on the team despite her current injuries.

There was a wheelchair waiting for us at check in for it was easier on Isla’s body if she didn’t put
so much weight on her leg.

Bree tried to put on a brave face as she and her sister exchanged goodbyes with each other, but
her eyes expressed her sadness and her lips were downturned. “I’m going to miss you. Who’s
going to play with me?” I pretended to not hear their conversation.

Jenny caught my eye and motioned me over. “It’s okay Claire, I think my dolt of a brother will
catch on rather quick. Did ye really have sex last night?”

Under her knowing gaze, I my face reddened because everyone seemed to know. “That’s
private,” I whispered hotly.

“It was obvious by the glow and he was preening like a peacock. It’ll all work out. I just hope last
night wasn’t a mistake because you still have Peter in Boston.” I read the concern in her
expression solely directed at me.

I ran a hand down the side of my face. I screwed up my face as I held back my own tears because
it shouldn’t be so complicated. It seemed as if every time I got something I wanted, I gave up
something else in my life. When would things balance out? Or at least get a fraction easier?

Jenny pulled me into a fierce hug and I shed a few tears in her loose hair. She rubbed my back and
shushed me. “Dinna cry sister, I canna stand yer tears. What the two of ye require now is some
time and space to think. Ye have just dealt with a difficult, emotional situation that force ye to
come together after all these years. It’s alright if ye dinna ken how things will progress from here.”

I nodded, desperately wanting to believe the words she was telling me. I squeezed her tighter
before pulling away from her. I was already a mess, and was more than a little thankful I hadn’t
put any make-up on my face.

Jenny moved over to Isla and they said their goodbyes, before the three of us headed towards
security. We waved at them as we began the process of going home. I couldn’t help but feel as if I
left mine, and I knew he probably had similar feelings at the moment.

I forced myself not to think about him as we made our way through and to our gate. It only served
to hurt me to think about him and the night we shared.

Do you dream about me
Looking to buy gold
Do you dream about me
About me, about me

His touch was still on my skin. The warmth filled me with something indescribable, and I ached
for his presence. I remembered how his tongue scraped against the skin of my breasts and how my
body sang for him. We made music, a new tune existed between us. A beautiful cadence of
harmony, melody, and a soulful rhythm joined together as we came together as two parts of one soul.

I’d realized my heart burned to ash, and that was all I had left of our encounter. Ashes of what was and what could’ve been. Our passion burned and fire blazed around us, taking us further into the flame, and we lit the match that started everything.

We stoked the flame until it swept us up and we were consumed. I couldn’t breathe because he was my oxygen, my lifeline. He made it possible for me to survive in the fire and survive the burns left behind on my skin and soul. We continued to burn until we fizzled, and there were barely any embers left to warm us.

I watched through the windows as our plane stopped at the gate. They would begin boarding soon enough and the distance would be there to prevent further physical contact.

My eyes slipped shut as tears burned my retinas because I wanted to go back. I had to tell him we could figure it out, but I couldn’t make those sorts of promises. We were doused in a bucket of freezing water last time. My skin prickled at the cold. Drenched from head to toe in ice, and I saw him.

His eyes glowed a dark blue as he stared at me in the distance. A divide forged as we dug our sticks in the ground. Where brightness once lived, darkness came in and stole its’ place. It claimed us and took everything we had to offer. The river flooded until the fire disappeared entirely. On the other side he lived and went on.

I shivered and wrapped my arms around my body, seeking warmth I couldn’t provide myself. I clutched at my skin until my fingers turned white. My lips tinged blue and my hair clung to my face as I cried out for that which I knew was no longer mine.

The river grew until an ocean formed and the distance became unbearable. It wasn’t a matter of swimming across any longer for I knew I was drowning.

A hand on my shoulder woke me from my light sleep. My eyes popped open to the sight of Melody smiling sadly at me. She didn’t have to ask about what happened for it was there in her eyes. “Come on Claire, time to go home.”

My head nodded as I draw myself up from the uncomfortable airport seat. Melody made all of the arrangements and completely changed our seats, but it was easier to sit Isla in first class in the front. Her casted leg doesn’t make travel easy for us, but between the three of us, we manage to create something comfortable for her.

She fully charged her iPad the night before, and I know in her bag, a summer reading book remained untouched. I took the window seat beside her, and Melody was across the aisle from us. She was only going to the hospital to check on some of her patients before driving halfway across town to visit the practice she joined.

As the plane filled with passengers, the countdown was on until we were in the air.

My eyes watched as we taxied the runaway. I felt as the plane picked up speed until the beginnings of flight happened, and then we were finally in the air. We rose higher and higher in the air, and I saw the city of Edinburgh below us. Jamie was down there somewhere. I placed my hand on the window and realized how empty I was on the inside.

I was drained after the events of last night and the early hours of this morning. “Sleep mommy,” Isla murmured to me.
I sank back into the seat and closed my eyes, letting my dreams float me away from the reality of what I’ve done.

When I awoke we were preparing for our descent into London where we had a one hour layover before a straight flight into Logan. Isla was drowsy as I roused her from her sleep. She had to take her pain medication soon for her leg.

“Do you want me to get you any food?” Her head bobbed a bit. I saw her energy was depleted and wondered what exactly she and her sister got up to last night.

As we made our way to our gate, we stopped briefly for coffee, juice, and pastries. There would be a meal on our next flight. While I wasn’t a huge fan of plane food, I knew Isla needed to eat something.

Isla and I waited for Melody to come back from the restroom in silence. It was oppressive and I felt judgmental waves rolling off of her. I knew she wanted to address it, but there are also topics you don’t have the right to bring up with your parents. “Oh out with it already!” I finally told her, unable to take it anymore.

Her dark blues widened impressively as her gaze swiveled in my direction. I saw her confliction emotions and considered which one she would go with first. We hadn’t much privacy in the hospital as there were always visitors.

She chewed on her lips with a pensive expression on her pretty face. She was still fair, especially after the last two weeks in the hospital. “Did you and dad have sex last night?”

I thanked God I hadn’t taken a swig of my coffee at that moment. “Isla,” I tried to hold her hand, but she pulled it back with a stubborn look. I sighed tiredly, not entirely read for this conversation. “I know what you want. The problem is it’s hard to give to you.”

“Do you love him?”

I wished fervently it was as simple as children believed. There was the Beatles song as well, but love wasn’t always enough. “I think you know the answer. Regardless the fact remains we live over three thousand miles apart, and we are divorced.”

Isla was tenacious and saw beyond my reasons. “People can get remarried. Did you use protection?”

My face hardened immediately as her disrespectful words. I was tiring of her impertinent behavior, and she crossed a line. “Look, I understand your anger is directed me because I am an easy target for you at the moment. However, your dad is a grown adult too. We make our own decisions, and this is a choice. You don’t get to ask me questions like that. I am your mother. Do you understand me?”

Her face was screwed up ready to argue back when Melody returned from the restroom. She folded her arms angrily across her chest and faced forward, ignoring me for the remainder of our wait. Melody and I exchanged seats on the flight to allow Isla time to cool down before we were home. I knew it was because she had too much of me in her and not enough of her father. She was forgiving and generous when she desired, but as she’d gotten older her resentment towards me increased as well.

The majority of the time we were alright as we navigated our relationship, but it was always after time in Scotland when I received the silent treatment and loathing glares.

Somewhere over the Atlantic I fell asleep and slept the entire way back to Boston. My dreams
were filled with images of him. I was drowning in Jamie when I was involved with another person. I needed my sleep to help me cope with reality and all the mistakes I was making.

I was minutes from full on sobbing, but I managed to hold it in. I was crumbling in my failures. “Oh darling,” my mum said upon catching sight of me. She pulled me into her arms and mumbled sweet things. “You’ll be alright Claire. I promise. Everything happens for a reason. It won’t always be so hard. Now get to work, and I’ll deal with hormones over there.”

I smiled a little with some difficulty before kissing her on the cheek. “I love you mum.”

I knelt in front of Isla and tipped her chin in my direction. “I respect you, and I want you to respect me. Daddy and I love you and your sister. Adults don’t always have the answers you want. I’m sorry you’re hurting, but I don’t want to confuse you. I’ll pick you up tomorrow after rounds. Have a nice afternoon with your grandma and tell Ellie’s parents hello for me.” I kissed her head.

“I love you too mom.” She said before we went our separate ways. It was just after noon, and I wasn’t feeling all the way rested but I needed the distraction work would provide.

“So should I bring it up or will you?”

I blew air out of my lips as I wiped the sweat from my brow. “I’m not sure what there is to say.”

“I feel as if you know your statement is bullshit. Bear, it’s alright to be scared of the future. Do you think you made a mistake?”

I ducked my head because it was the answer it shouldn’t be. “No,” I said, sliding into her Mercedes. “I should.”

Her eyes peered at me and I saw the love she bore for me. It was no longer romantic, but sort of how one regarded a sister. When she met Callie, her whole life tilted on its’ axis and she was swept away in the aftermath. I officiated the wedding and Isla and Bree served as flower girls.

I knew Mel wasn’t the biggest fan of Peter. She believed I was settling for someone because I couldn’t have what I truly wanted. She was aware I had genuine love for him, but it wasn’t as strong or all consuming as the one I experienced in the past.

I didn’t always know. In the beginning, it took time for me to warm up to him, and it was because I wanted someone else. It was unfair how I treated him. I had to tuck Jamie into a box and lock it because I couldn’t allow him to invade my life. I had to move on and figure out who I was outside of our relationship. I had no idea if I could be in another relationship.

The glass was cool against my skin, and I wished I wasn’t empty.

My phone buzzed in my lap. I ignored it.

“Sometimes Claire you make things harder than they should be.” I was finding that to be the truest statement about my life. “I worry about you because sometimes you’re the loneliest person in the room.”

“What the hell do you want from me Mel?”

“Honesty.” She stated.

I blamed the raging humidity outside, but my face brightened probably three shades of red. “I don’t know when I’ve lied.” I said rather tartly. I didn’t appreciate her insinuations.
She sighed and readjusted the sunglasses on her face. “Honey, I’m not implying you’ve intentionally lied to me at any point during our friendship. My issue is with you not being honest with yourself. You hold everyone to the same standard when it comes to the truth, but you lie constantly to yourself. I saw the glances exchanged between you and Jamie. You stared at the man as if he filled in the missing pieces of your soul.” I looked away as she continued. “He looks at you the same way. So I’ll ask once, and only this one time. Did you have sex last night?”

“Yes.”

“Do you regret it?”

“No.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I wish I knew.” The honest to God trust was I felt sick on the inside. My life was falling apart at the seams. I thought I was alright and strong enough to see him and leave him again.

She squeezed my shoulder sympathetically, but I didn’t appreciate the pity directed my way. I deserved to feel wretched about what I’d done. I technically cheated on two men.

The drive to the hospital was quicker than usual as most people were already at work for the day, and afternoon traffic wasn’t due to start for several more hours. We slid into a parking spot close to the building, and I exhaled in relief as the environment inside the car was stifling. I had no plausible explanation for more actions, nor did I have any sort of plan in place going forth.

I pulled my hair back into a bun as I didn’t want to imagine the state it was in after all of the traveling. Mel grabbed my arm before I started to walk away. “Don’t beat yourself up about this Bear. I think you’ve known since you first stepped off the plane in Scotland what you truly wanted from your life. Why are you denying yourself? If anything put Peter off for a while, and think about what’s going to make you happy in life. Because I can tell you for a fact, you’re not happy.” With those parting words, she brushed past me into the hospital and I only saw the bounce of her blonde waves as she disappeared into the crowd.

My phone rang again, and I finally decided to turn it off. At the moment, my only focus was my work. I didn’t have any available space left in my brain for the other details of my life.

The residents were floating about and some greeted me as they noticed me. “Hello Dr. Fraser,” one of my residents with potential called.

“I hope you’re daughter’s doing well,” another said.

“Hello Dr. Fraser,” one of my residents with potential called.

“I hope you’re daughter’s doing well,” another said.

My residents were notorious for sucking up to me when they saw it as potential for advancement in the program. Most of them were quite bright with a few needing extra encouragement and skills labs to catch up to their classmates. I had no room for coddling those incapable of following my instructions.

A few times I saw the blonde hair of Peter and ducked around a corner to avoid him. It wasn’t mature of me, but I was self aware enough to know if we spoke I would reveal what happened. The guilt burned in my chest. I was reminded of the Tell-Tale Heart.

In the scenario I was the murderer. My crime was cheating. I supposed the victim was Peter. I suspected he was aware of something happening between Jamie and I because her phone calls were short and terse. He became terribly moody and argumentative, and I wasn’t sure why. I had given no previous evidence to showing any interest in Jamie (lie), but he didn’t know that.
As far as he was concerned I was faithful to him. I didn’t want to imagine his reaction when I revealed what I had done. The shame nearly toppled me over, it was strong and pervasive, and I knew I couldn’t in good conscience continue on as if I hadn’t slept with my ex-husband and admitted my love for him. It was unfair and cruel to do that to him. He’d done nothing to warrant such behavior for me.

I planted my head on my forearms as I stared at the dark paneling of my desk. I was a true wreck. A knock on my door distracted me from my musings.

“Hey Lady Jane, I was wondering when you’d grace these halls with your beautiful face.”

An unencumbered smile grew on my face as Joe entered the room. “Well you’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“What’s wrong?” I’d known Joe for longer than Mel, and he read my moods as well as I did. “Oh Claire,” he groaned, already figuring out I was a mess. “How’s Jamie?”

I swallowed heavily, bile threatening to come up. My throat tightened and sweat poured out of my body. It seemed as if the world was closing in on me and I couldn’t breathe. Everything spun around me until blackness took over.

*If we're going down, we're going down in flames*

  Flyin' round the highway, tryna get away
  Don't speak, I'll try to save us from ourselves
  If were going down, we're going down in flames
  Going down in flames

**Chapter End Notes**

I'll be hiding under my rock. Thank you all for your kind messages and lovely words. I truly enjoy reading and responding to them. I would apologize, but I'm not sorry. See you guys possibly next week! Don't forget there's a HEA, so it's not the end.
Try Sleeping With a Broken Heart

Chapter Summary

This is a transition chapter and will set up the second half of the story. There's also a significant time skip as well.

Chapter Notes

Hi guys, I have a longer note at the end. I'm sorry it's taken a while to post this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CPOV

The stillness of the night created an atmosphere of silent contemplation.

The phone taunted me from the corner of the nightstand. I was tempted to call and make a plea for forgiveness and love. It was probably all of the alcohol coursing through my system that had me believing it was a wonderful idea.

I indulged in spirits with my friends at a party celebrating all of our successes and achievements. I begged off in the past not wanting to deal with the hassle of finding a babysitter or cajoling my mother into watching the girls for me. I always felt better when I was with them, and hated worrying about who was watching over them. Secretly, it was because I knew they didn’t actually need me hovering over them like I did when they were younger. They wouldn’t cry or throw a tantrum if I was gone for a night.

It was more than likely somewhere between my second shot of tequila and the rum and coke where things were a bit hazy. Mel had already called my mother to inform her of my inebriated state, and to ask if she were okay staying the night. My head flopped back into the arm of the couch as Melody settled me. “You know Claire, sometimes I forget how much fun you can be.”

I squinted my eyes at her as I struggled to clear the fogginess in my head. My tongue reminded me of lead, and I found it difficult to open my mouth to express my thoughts. I merely nodded, which was somewhat safe for the moment. I knew in the morning, I wouldn’t appreciate my decision to drink as much as I had.

Melody sat on the edge of the coffee table with her hands in her lap as she regarded me sadly. I recognized pity when I saw it, and I didn’t appreciate the sight of it on her face. “Oh don’t look at me like that,” I muttered disdainfully. “I’m perfectly alright.”

One of her carefully sculpted eyebrows arched. “You’re a mess.” She stated plainly.

“No I’m not,” I scoffed, attempting to push myself off the couch and regain my misplaced equilibrium.

Her face softened, the lines relaxing as she tucked her hair back. “Honey, you drank more than
...your weight’s worth of alcohol tonight. Do not lie there and tell me false truths. I’ve known you for too long now to believe such things. If you won’t be honest, then don’t talk.” I had wounded her with my dishonesty. I saw it in her face before she masked her emotions. “The guest room is ready whenever you pull yourself together. Good night,” she said before heading up the stairs.

I finally managed to get myself steady enough to make the excruciating trip to the guest room. I stumbled and flopped onto the bed like a fish out of water. There was delayed pain from stubbing my toe on the bed post, but it was numb from the amount of alcohol I consumed.

My headed pounded angrily against my skull, but luckily I wasn’t feeling a hint of nausea at the moment. In the morning, I probably wouldn’t be as fortunate. Everyone shared stories and laughter over the course of the night, but all I thought about were my own failures. I was in my thirties, divorced with two children, my mother lived with me, and my ex went as far as he possibly could to get away from me. I wasn’t the person people were clamoring to be despite how it appeared on the outside. My life seemed sort of picturesque or idyllic in a way that it actually wasn’t.

I sat there in the darkness with strange shadows lurked and silence reigned supreme. My eyes fell on my phone and before I knew what I was doing and could stop myself, my fingers were unlocking and dialing. My actions hadn’t fully caught up until I heard a “hello.”

I froze and pulled the phone away from my ear as I stared at the name on my screen. What was I doing? I shouldn’t have called anyone in my inebriated state, and should’ve gone straight to sleep. I hadn’t reached to call him impulsively in years. Why was it him?

“Sassenach?” His voice sounded raspy. “Claire, I can hear ye breathing.”

I bit my lip and scrunched my eyes as I attempted to consider my options. My brain was on the sluggish side, and I was having a difficult time processing any sort of information.

“Oh Dia, are ye drunk?”

I sighed because of how well he knew me. Despite years and distance separating us, no one knew me quite like him. He understood what made me tick and all of my little idiosyncrasies. It was like him in a way to appreciate all of me including my quirks. “Yes,” I finally answered him. My tongue was heavy in my mouth, but I pushed through with a little effort.

I heard rustling on his end and wondered if I interrupted anything. There was an ocean of possibilities for what he was currently doing. “Have ye had any water?”

“No,” I murmured. “I’ve only settled now.” My head was still a bit foggy, but some of my thoughts were quite clear. “I’m not sure why I called you.” I admitted to him.

There were some other noises in the background. “I think we both ken that’s a lie.” I swallowed back bile. “Do ye want to tell me the real reason?”

My eyes darted around the dark room. “I’m lonely. I fear I’ve made a mess of everything in my life, and what if I never find happiness again? Maybe I’m destined to be alone and watch others find their own.” I was entirely unable to follow the process of my pity party that particular night.

It was the end of one journey and beginning of another, but Jamie had missed my start. He’d essentially washed his hands of me, and I wondered often if the whole situation was more my fault than his. I carried around my own guilt regularly.

I imagined him as he licked his lips. His eyes would pinch together and his nose crinkled as he conjured up the right words to relay to me. “Claire, sweetheart I think you’ve also had too much to...
drink, but I also believe that ye will find happiness again. Yer such an intelligent, beautiful, strong, compassionate, compelling woman that any man would be lucky to call ye his.”

Tears stung my eyes his words, and I suddenly wished there was a lack of distance separating us because I would’ve crawled into his arms and never let go. “Do you consider yourself among them?” I wanted to smack myself as soon as the words left me as I was hyper aware of the awkward position I placed him in.

“Always,” he replied softly. “I canna pretend as if ye weren’t the love of my life. I ken some people believe we have multiple, but I think there’s only one soul mate for everyone. I lost my other half and maybe it was never mine to begin with.” He finished and I felt empty at his words.

I wanted to reassure him and comfort him, to confirm that I was always his heart and soul. I was his in blood and sweat. We’d made our vows. We had small tattoos on our ring fingers. I had a black J and he had a C. I normally covered it with make-up so I didn’t have to think about what it represented and the sorts of feelings it brought up. It was part of my commitment to him because if I was willing to permanently mark my flesh, then I had to be all in. I wanted to prove to him that our relationship would last through everything the future had for us.

Perhaps I was wrong, but I still had yet to regret the decision to mark my skin. If anything it reminded me if I were to find another in the future, he should consume me just as Jamie had. Those weren’t necessarily the correct words to describe the sentiment. Maybe it wasn’t they weren’t strong enough to describe what Jamie symbolized in my life.

He was the ocean in which I drowned myself. There was no sense of coherency or comprehension when I allowed myself to truly fall for him.

I hadn’t tried to use logic or reason to justify my relationships, and maybe that’s made all of the difference. When I met men, I thought of the long term. If I couldn’t envision any sort of future for us, I cut my ties with them. It was cruel and screamed apathetic, but I’d already put myself through the ringer in the aftermath of tragedy.

I destroyed a relationship with a few issues sprinkled here and there, and allowed everything to fester between us because I couldn’t bridge a gap. I refused to put effort because I didn’t want to hurt more. “Is it pathetic if I told you I still loved you?”

“Would ye pity me if I told ye, I could never love anyone like you?”

I choked on some tears as released a well deserved laugh. “Maybe one day,” I told him.

“Get some rest, drink water, and be happy Claire. The future will come.” I wiped away the lingering wetness on my cheeks and clicked the end button. I was still all in, blood and sweat. My tears, my blood, everything that I was, it was his.

-2015

I scrunched my eyes and groaned as light began filtering through my eyelids. I remembered the suffocating and the heat I experienced before I blacked out in the confines of my office. The shock on Joe’s face was more than enough for me to know I more than likely hit my head on the way down. It explained the dull ache at the base of my skull.

I carefully peeled an eye open to find myself hooked up to an IV with a hospital bracelet and everything. I sort of imagined this scenario occurring the moment I registered my fading consciousness.

Everyone kept confronting me about my decisions and my relationships, but the truth was I
absolutely had no idea. I hadn’t thought that far ahead because I could never think in terms of the future.

I attempted it once in my whole life when I was pregnant with Gabriel, and the disappointment I suffered afterwards was more than enough to thwart me from trying it again. I was practical and logistical, and relied on the tangible to see me through. I wasn’t a wonderer with a flight of fancy like Jamie. Jamie would say my father’s death had a profound impact on how I viewed life, but truthfully I was already like this when he was alive. He always said I was such a serious child, especially in comparison to my younger brother.

What I told him was the honest to goodness truth about what I was currently experiencing. We rushed through the whole process before, and in the moment I was ready to tackle the responsibility of being a wife and eventually a mother. Then I had no idea the twists the roads of my life would take, and the form my eventual pain would come in.

I thought about the dream I had. Three years ago, I was fresh off my residency and celebrating with my coworkers. We could hardly believe we survived all those years of hell. We were forced to take shitty shifts, or do the grunt work of attendings. We had to fill out hundreds of charts and monitor patient vitals. We made nice with the nurses and forged friendships to last a lifetime. We learned the craft of surgery and perfected our techniques. Some of my friends stayed, while others moved onto new destinations. We still chatted and they visited occasionally. It was different.

Of course, the one way most people who were relatively young celebrated was by hitting the bar. We did a fancy dinner with all of us before deciding throwing darts and playing pool was much more fun and a better way to release five years’ worth of stress and sleepless nights.

I couldn’t say even in the present what caused me to indulge so much, but I’d forgotten about the phone call I placed that night. I was completely plastered, and the next morning I woke up with my hair flattened by my pillow, my make-up smudged, and my mouth felt like something died in there. It wasn’t pleasant in the slightest.

It wasn’t until around two in the afternoon I resembled something human looking. I didn’t arrive back home until nearly six as my equilibrium was still not up to my usual standards. Mel smiled sympathetically and passed the painkillers. She made me a late lunch which I nearly tossed in the toilet soon after, but we never spoke about the night again.

It was sort of embarrassing to have that sort of clarity in my life again. I was unaccustomed to needing someone. Want was a different word and had all kinds of connotations, but wanting and needing were two distinctive things.

I hadn’t considered then that where Jamie was concerned it was always both. The problem was I had no clue what it meant in realistic terms with us separated by more than just an ocean. Sometimes it seemed as if the river between us wasn’t as wide as if our two banks were mending the gap. Those two weeks we spent were some of the best in the last few years of my life.

Did it make me an awful person to think such a thing? I wanted to bury my face and release all of my feelings into it because what was I supposed to do. I had a perfectly lovely man who I did love, but was the quantity the same? Did I love him as much or less than? Was it quantifiable or fair in the first place?

I pushed back my tears of frustration and shut my eyes once more.

Sleep was my escape from the screwed up love triangle I made of my life. The problem was one third of the triangle didn’t know about the other.
He had done nothing wrong except love me. Yet, here I was thinking of another man. While I was not an actual adulterer, I was a cheater. There was no way to misconstrue the facts on that one.

To find relief from my traitorous thoughts I drifted back to sleep where my conscious mind no longer had any control.

A nurse woke me every hour to monitor my concussion. Luckily, I never quite woke up from my slumber, and found it more than easy to fall back into unconsciousness. I was exhausted mentally and physically, and my body simply sought rest from all the current stressors of my life. Everyone expected something from me, but I had nothing left to give.

I’d stretched myself beyond my limitations and given my heart back to its’ rightful owner. If I was truthful with myself, I would say it never actually left him. He possessed it all along without knowing it.

It was the moment I saw him again I realized it how pervasive and persistent my feelings for Jamie were.

“Hello Dr. Fraser,” Macy one of my favorite nurses greeted as she entered my room. It was half past eight in the morning, and with a bit of luck they would discharge me after morning rounds. “You’re looking much better.”

I smiled wanly. I was more than a bit mortified by yesterday’s fainting. I had never done that before in my life, and for it to occur at my place of work was the icing on the proverbial cake. I was positive I was the topic amongst the nurses and residents, not to say the attendings were above gossip, but many of them feared me in a way. The residents did too as I was tough on them..

I expected the best and had high standards. I was never harder than they needed. Some required extra motivation and more than a little push, while others needed just the slightest hint of encouragement. It was all about balance.

“I feel much better. Do you think I’ll be able to go home today?” I tried not to appear to eager, but the hospital environment was making me uneasy. It was not a feeling I was accustomed to as I’d always enjoyed spending countless hours here, but my skin was crawling. It was a reaction to the close proximity of Peter.

I knew deep down he was keeping a distance as if sensing my own, and Joe probably told him to back off.

She checked my vitals. “Well we mostly kept you for observation because you hadn’t regained consciousness. I imagine Dr. Evans will have no issue discharging you after rounds. You just need some rest and a few pain killers. Your fall left a nasty bruise, and you did need four stitches. It might scar a bit, but nothing that won’t eventually fade.” Her eyes darted to the door before resting upon me once more.

I sighed and gestured for her to take a seat. “What is it Macy?”

“Well,” her hesitation unnerved me. She was never someone to mince words, and I had the impression she was holding back something. “There are all sorts of rumors floating around the hospital about you…” her voice petered off, and I felt for her.

While we were friends, I wasn’t normally a talkative or open person about my personal life. “What are the rumors if I may ask?” I was nervous about what my coworkers were saying.

Macy’s grey eyes showed her reluctance to ask the question. Her face was full of indecision and
silence descended over us. The tension was palpable, and I suddenly became anxious. Nervous thoughts crept into my brain because no good could come from what she was holding back.

“I’ve heard in the break room you’re pregnant, or there’s a popular one spreading that you and Peter broke things off after he proposed to you.”

Immediately, I sat up in bed with surprise written all over my face. “I beg your pardon?” Where did people come up with such vitriol? I expected my colleagues to behave as mature adults, and not involve themselves in my affairs. It never bothered me in the past when someone because hot gossip for weeks, but I was slowly understanding what a curse it was.

Her face colored as she lowered her eyes in embarrassment. “I truly apologize for any offense. I don’t believe anything unless it comes from the horse’s mouth. I thought you should be aware of what people were spreading about you.” I considered offering her words of comfort, but my head refused to wrap itself around what people were saying.

It was understandable the rumors about Peter and I. Normally we spent much of our free time at work with one another, but I had actually gone in the opposite direction when I spotted him. My colleagues were bound to notice the change in my behavior, and it would only lead to more rumors about why I wasn’t seeing him.

“I was out of line for telling you all about that,” she finished checking my vitals. “I hope Isla is doing better. I heard she had some sort of accident on a horse.”

I cleared my throat and silently thanked her for the quick change of topic. “Yes, she’s recovering at a friend’s house currently. I’ll pick her up on my way home. She required surgery for some internal bleeding, and her leg suffered a bit of damage. However she should be as good as new with some physical therapy and rest.”

“Well you tell her she’s in my prayers, and I hope you feel better too Claire.”

I smiled at her. “I’m not wholly bothered by what you said.” I told as she was about to exit. “I’m not pregnant and I haven’t broken things off with Peter.” Yet I mentally added.

Her shoulders slumped in what I thought was relief. “Rest up, they’ve started rounds. We will have to make plans soon.”

By the time rounds finished, I was well on my way to being discharged. Not surprisingly the person waiting for me at the nurses’ station was Mel. She wore her worried mother look, and I knew I would get an earful from her.

“What the hell Claire?”

I rubbed my forehead wearily as I filled out paperwork. “My blood sugar dropped quite a bit. I hadn’t eaten much of anything during our trip home, and the heat was stifling. I got overheated and fainted. Sadly, I hit my desk on the way down.” I glanced up as I felt the bitter sting of tears. It seemed I would never be done.

Mel wrapped an arm around my shoulders and guided me to her car. Her face told me everything and I tried to ignore it. I rested my head against the window and fell back to sleep.

Somewhere along the way, we picked up Isla, but I was too tired to notice. “Mom?” Her voice held a hint of worry, and I smiled sleepily at her.

“Don’t worry about her, she’s on painkillers.”
“What happened?” I knew Melody’s words weren’t meant to throw Isla into a panic, but considering her own recent hospital stay, I doubted the word painkillers would be used in any sort of positive context. “Why does she have stitches?”

“She fainted and bumped her head. She has a slight concussion, but she will be just fine. She needs some rest. Which is why I’ll be staying with you guys tonight?”

In my sleep altered mind, I didn’t appreciate the thought of her hanging around. I longed for someone else to take care of me, but was more than self-aware enough to know I wouldn’t call him. I simply couldn’t bring myself to do it, and it was that reason alone why Jamie eventually agreed to a divorce. My walls were always up instead of lowered. I couldn’t allow him into my mind.

I found myself in my own bed and sunk into its’ comforts.

JPOV

I tried Claire on her mobile more than a dozen times and reached her voicemail. Eventually, it went straight to voicemail instead of ringing. I didn’t know if she was avoiding me or if her work was busy, or simply her phone died.

I kent very well she arrived back in Boston. I checked online for arrivals, and her flight also arrived early.

Isla texted me from her grandmother’s phone. She was on her way to stay with a friend for the evening as her mother had a late shift to work.

Bree sulked her way into the house and I wanted nothing more than to see her smile. She was upset about being left behind, and I sympathized with the lass. She pushed food around her plate at lunch before excusing herself to her room.

Jenny smiled sadly. “She was quite upset at the airport. There were a few tears on the way back. She’s not used to being on her own. I think if ye give it some time, she’ll adjust.”

The problem was I didn’t want her to adjust. She deserved to spend time with her sister and her mother. All of the decisions Claire and I made all those years ago were selfish. We chose a path that led to heartbreak for our children. I knew for a fact Claire hadn’t visited her former home in ages because she didn’t want close proximity to me.

Tom felt the need to share the information with me. He didn’t blame me as he knew his sister well, and understood her in a ways I couldn’t or perhaps refused to.

As soon as she left, I knew it was a mistake for me to allow her to leave like that. We shared a night, and were simply going to pretend as if it was a one off. I knew and I was sure she did as well that there were no one nights between the two of us. There was only forever.

“What are ye thinking?” Something on my face must’ve registered to Jenny because she was instantly suspicious of me, and rightly so because I was slowly formulating a plan. “Are ye really considering what it is I think ye are?” Her face reflected her feelings on the matter. Her eyes held caution, but there was a small spark of hope as well.

I ran a hand through my hair. “I dinna ken what ye are talking about. My priority at the moment is to make sure Bree is alright. I haven’t had time with her like this since she could talk. Say hello to
Ian and the whole family for me, and dinna worry so much Jenny.” I kissed her head and walked her to the door.

I loved my sister dearly, but she meddled far too much in my life. She meant well, but she couldna help but mother me after the death of our mother. She took on the responsibility, and while I was thankful I preferred her to simply stay my sister.

She didn’t particularly enjoy being reminded she had no control over my life, but she backed off and chose to give me a hug with a look that said “I hope you know what you’re doing.” I hoped I did as well.

CPOV

Four weeks later

Rest and no stress did wonders for me. There was still a dull throbbing sensation in my head, but the pain was much less intense. I had some pain medication Melody picked up for me on the way home, and there was a glass of nightstand with two pills ready for me. Within a few days, the stitches were removed and there was only a tiny scar along my hairline.

Melody and her wife were truly godsend. Callie helped with Isla, especially as I was mostly on the receiving end of the silent treatment. My eleven year old refused to speak to me unless it was absolutely necessary, and even then there was an exchange of glares.

She hadn’t quite forgiven me for my transgressions. In the beginning, she was mindful of my concussion, but as soon as I returned to work, her attitude did a complete 180. My sweet child was replaced with a gloomy, angsty adolescent.

There were a couple of slammed doors resulting in a few yelling matches between the two of us, which was an entirely new development in our relationship. I preferred not to raise my voice, but the child was driving me insane. I believed it was her intent. Every time I attempted to talk to her, she refused my presence and shut down until I left. I heard her chatting with her friends through FaceTime until I finally took her iPad away from her.

Then the intensity of her anger increased tenfold. She delivered her first “I hate you” with perfect stoicism. Her eyes smoldered a deep blue as her nostrils flared. Her cheeks were flushed with the force of her words. Immediately following her proclamation she ran up the stairs to her bedroom and didn’t come out for an entire day.

The weeks were rough and the only time we were in each other’s company for a significant amount of time without an argument was when we video chatted with Bree.

My poor little baby girl was absolutely miserable. While she relished in all of the alone time with her father, it was never her intention to be there all on her own. She didn’t know any child aside from the little girl she met. They’d met up a couple of times over the course of the past month, but Bree missed her friends at home. She missed her bed and her friends.

“Mommy,” her face was wet with her tears. “I just want to be there.” My heart ached as I longed to hold her in my arms and sit with her in the rocking chair. “I’m glad Uncle Tom and I fly out tomorrow.”

She left Jamie’s earlier in the afternoon with Tom. They flew into London and he showed some of the sights like the London Eye and Big Ben. Then he took her to a favorite pub of ours from when
we were children and they had fish and chips.

I smiled. “Well soon enough I’ll get to hold you and I won’t let go until next year. How does that sound?” I asked her. I considered Isla’s disposition might change as soon as her sister returned. I was truly missing the sunny girl who radiated warmth and love, but somehow lost that side of herself. There was a stranger currently inhabiting her body. I worried about what it meant for the next several years of my life.

Part of her frustration was the slow going pace of physical therapy. While she made strides, there was always room for more improvement. Her leg was almost there, but she still required another two weeks before the doctor would sign off on her returning to field hockey. It didn’t please Isla at all.

A Cheshire cat smiled spread across Bree’s face. “I can’t wait. Do you think I could get a cheeseburger when I get home?” I bit back a smile at her request. “I want something very American.”

“Yes, anything you’d like lovey. You’re my weary traveler after all.”

Her head turned and low murmurs were exchanged. “Uncle Tom says it’s time to sleep. I love so much mommy.”

“And I you sweetheart. Good night and I’ll see you in the morning.”

I sighed as we ended the call. I missed her entirely too much over the last few weeks. It was strange with only Isla and myself occupying the house. It was different from our usual summers. I tried to do things with her on my days off, but she wasn’t as receptive to the idea.

The front door opened and luckily didn’t slam for once as Isla returned home. She was in such a surly mood when she left last night, and I fretted the trend might continue.

She entered the living room with her hair tied up in a knot. Her shorts clung to the muscles of her legs and her t-shirt was knotted at the side. Before my eyes seemed to transform into a young woman, and I had no idea when it happened.

“Mommy,” her voice trembled as her delicate features crumbled into despair.

I was off the couch and throwing my arms around her as she dissolved into tears. I held her tight and waited until she felt ready to talk.

Her sobs eventually turned into sniffles as she slowly pulled back. Her grip was still tight around me. “My stomach hurts. And then there was blood.”

My face softened as comprehension dawned on me as to what happened. “Your period started. Oh darling, come on.” I ushered her up to my bathroom. “We’ve talked about it, and I did give you a pad to keep.”

She nodded her head pathetically. “It was a shock. There was a lot of blood in my underwear.”

I seated her on the toilet and began a mini explanation. I didn’t fall on clichés. “It’ll happen once a month, and sometimes it can get irregular especially if you stay active. It’ll last somewhere between three to seven days. You might have symptoms that allow you to know when it’s coming.”

“Why does my stomach hurt?” I silently enjoyed the childish innocence in her voice.
I smoothed back her loose hair. “Well your uterus expands during this time, and your experiencing mini contractions that we call cramps. They range in intensity. Some girls never get them. They can usually be controlled with pain medication like Midol or Advil. Any sort of pain reliever works.” I pressed a kiss to her head. “It’s really your body transitioning to being a woman.”

She buried her face in my stomach and I ran my fingers through her tangled locks. “It’s all right.” I said soothingly. “How about I make your favorite for dinner and we binge on ice cream afterwards in my bed?”

She nodded. “Can I take a nap before then?” Her bottom lip jutted out into a pout.

I was reminded of how young she truly was, and how she still needed me in her life. In that moment, I found myself thankful she was there with me because I could share in this special time in her life. “Here’s two Tylenol, it should help relieve the pain. After your nap, you’ll feel much better.”

She swallowed both pills with some water. “Tuck me in?” I grinned and followed her into her bedroom. It was a disaster area as she wasn’t up to cleaning, and I wasn’t in the mood for anymore arguments. “I’m sorry mom.” I lifted my brow as I considered her. “I’ve been terrible to you for the last month, and I want you to know I don’t actually hate you. It’s been frustrating not being able to do anything. Practice starts in a few days, and I still have two more weeks of PT.” I tucked a strand behind her ear as I just listened to whatever came out.

Isla was never able to mask her emotions and I saw the conflict in her eyes. “I guess I didn’t know how much I truly wanted you and dad back together until I saw you guys in Scotland. You’ve broken it off with Peter so why haven’t you guys talked?”

It was hard to hide my deep sigh. “Honey, I ended my relationship with Peter because of some grown up things. I have everything I need with you girls and he’s looking to start a family. I’ve already got one.” I tapped her nose as she frowned thoughtfully. I knew she didn’t fully understand the situation, nor did I expect her to as her age. She was far too young to know all of the inner workings and idiosyncrasies of my relationship, or how devastated Peter was by my decision.

“Your dad and I were good together a longtime ago, but sometimes people aren’t meant to be with one another. We’ve hurt each other a lot, and I don’t want to hurt him.”

“Because you love him.” She added stubbornly.

“I know in the movies and television love seems almost simple. If you love someone, you inevitably end up together, but real life doesn’t work out the way you want. While you were correct in your assumption about what transpired between your dad and I, it wasn’t your place to call me out on it. I’m your mother, and there are boundaries one simply doesn’t cross. I don’t talk to your grandmother about her personal life because that’s her business. Do you understand?” If I wanted her to come away with anything from this conversation, it was how out of line she was. I was an adult and her mother, and no matter what she felt for me, she needed to respect me.

Her lips were downturned and the room was silent. Her eyes were shut and I almost thought she fell asleep. “I get it mom. But what if you got pregnant?”

“Not going to happen,” I promised her. “Now rest up and I’ll fix dinner.” I tucked in the blankets around her, and she snuggled into her bed.

As I thought about it, I ran into my bathroom.
Chapter End Notes

Well I'm in the process of moving and packing up a house. I don't have as much time to write currently, which is probably the reason for my writer's block as well. My mind has been so busy so then it's hard to actually sit and focus.
Memories Crash

Chapter Summary

Leave a comment about the easter eggs I've scattered through the chapter. There's one at the beginning and another at the end.

Chapter Notes

Sorry not sorry for the angstiness of this chapter. I've been in that sort of mood.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"It's always too soon, it's always too fast
It hurts so hard breaking just like glass
When your heart hits the floor
And memories crash"

CPOV

Dear Jamie, I started in my journal. I never intended for him to actually read the words I wrote but in the beginning my therapist encouraged me to write letters to him as I clearly displayed unresolved issues about our relationship. The journal began as a way for me to express the thoughts I couldn’t say aloud. It was cowardly in a way because much of what I wrote he deserved to know.

All of my life I relied on the usage of words to assist me in whatever endeavor I was going through. If I needed to argue, I had the words to properly make my case and assure a victory for myself. If I needed an apology, I knew the sorts of words that made forgiveness easier for the receiver to hand out.

My mother told me when I was thirteen, one day words would betray me if I kept wielding them like they were a sword to protect me from all the hurts of the world. I built a wall around my heart to safeguard my feelings because if experiencing the pain my mother suffered after my father’s passing was any indication, love was a lot more trouble than it was worth.

I ruminated heavily throughout my early teens as I considered how many sorts of things had to go right in the world for a person to discover the other half to their soul.

I went through a fascination with the gods of old and discovered how man and women were once one creature with a shared soul, but the gods were jealous of tis fact. They punished humans by separating the soul so that a person regardless of if they were man or woman walked around with only half a soul. They traipsed through searching for the other half to make them whole.

In my mind, I came to the conclusion I spent lifetimes searching for the other half of my soul and wondered if I had found it. It scared me in a way to comprehend how I wasn’t as whole as I thought myself to be. I hadn’t wanted to rely on anyone, especially a man because why did I need someone to make something I already should’ve been.
When we met, I must admit Jamie, the emptiness inside of me started to recede. The cracks and holes filled in until I was a whole person. Unknowingly, you had become the best part of me, and you’d shown me how life truly could be.

You asked me once if I would take it back. I told you no, and I meant it. I couldn’t regret all the paths that led me to you. In youth and folly, I pushed it all away because I couldn’t understand why you continued to stay. Perhaps, it is because our two souls recognized one another after all this time apart.

I’ve always had a fondness for poetry, Walt Whitman is one of my favorites. He wrote a poem about passing strangers.

Passing stranger! You do not know how longingly I look upon you,
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking, (it comes to me as of a dream,)
I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you,
All is recall’d as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste, matured,
You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a girl with me,
I ate with you and slept with you, your body has become not yours only nor left my body mine only,
You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass, you take of my beard, breast, hands, in return,
I am not to speak to you, I am to think of you when I sit alone or wake at night alone,
I am to wait, I do not doubt I am to meet you again, I am to see to it that I do not lose you

The crazy part was I understood the exact meaning after I met you. We were merely two passing strangers on a train to London, and somehow during the duration of the ride we’d connected on a deeper level. We kept meeting again because we were both aware we were so much more.

I’m not sure if you were aware, but I wasn’t good at socializing with my peers. I had the same friends since I was reception. I never spoke to strangers, yet you intrigued me and challenged me in a way no one ever had. The more time we spent together, the more I began to see how all the strings between us interconnected to create a beautiful tapestry.

I could’ve simply gone on from that day without acknowledging your presence again. It was years later, I realized a stranger could be someone you knew. I slept beside you for months, but I marveled and wondered at the stranger next to me. How did I go from knowing everything about you to suddenly feeling like an outsider in your presence? It baffled me and I hated it.

The day we signed those papers, I realized perhaps it wasn’t in the cards or us during this lifetime. We’ve had many where we enjoyed one another’s company and others where death and life separated us. It’s chilling in a way to think that sometimes we have to circumvent fate. In this life, I think we were too stubborn and persistent to wait for our time.

I don’t know how to say the words this time. In the past, they came easy and I told you first, but I’ve told you our time isn’t now. I can’t do this to you. I’ve done enough, and I want you to be happy.

I don’t know how it happened, but I would still say yes. You offered me everything with one night.

-All my love,

Claire

The pen slipped from my fingers with a gentle thud onto my desk. I’d harbored a resentment
against him for such a longtime, but with every passing moment in Scotland, I realized I used those feelings of hurt to hide what I and everyone else knew. I was hopelessly and perhaps recklessly in love. I was haunted by the island I formerly called home. There was an imprint of us everywhere I went, and while we’d spent several years in Boston together, it was different. Here, not everyone knew the history of the Claire and Jamie saga. They didn’t know I’d lost my other half by looking at me. No one had to know the sorrow I buried deep in my heart.

The door was thrown open and several preteen girls rushed inside. With the return of her daughters, their friends were welcomed back into the fold to create an atmosphere of loud squeals and screams at most hours of the day.

Isla’s walking was much improved after six weeks with her cast finally removed a few days previous. Her spirits were brighter and she smiled more often, but still it lacked the warmth when directed at me.

I tried to continue my method of patience with her, but my frustration steadily increased as she continued with her ignoring me policy.

Bree was different. Her hair shone brighter than usual against her pale, freckly skin. There was an air of maturity coating her that hadn’t existed when she left Boston or when I left her. It clung to her like a new dress, and I found myself in constant surprise how she adopted the role of mediator and helped out regularly around the house.

She remembered to pick up her sports equipment. Her team eagerly welcomed her back for the season, and she was anticipating the upcoming tournaments. They were traveling to Florida in a few months for a huge one, and she was excited because her team was also taking a trip to Universal Studios.

Long arms wrapped around my neck as lips met my cheek. “Hi mommy,” Bree greeted happily. “What are you doing?” Her eyes peered curiously at my journal, which I promptly closed.

My secrets were my own, and I didn’t need my daughters mixed up in matters not concerning them at the moment anyways. “Just some writing,” I told her as she left the room for the kitchen.

They said teenage boys ate a lot, but they honestly had nothing on a room full of preteen girls. I was constantly shopping for snacks and asking who was staying for dinner to know how much to make. The house was busier than ever with the constant hustle.

We left for Martha’s Vineyard the day after next, but the girls were already packed unlike at the beginning of summer when we rushed to finish their last minute preparations before they departed for Scotland. I triple checked they’d packed everything they’d need for the trip.

I needed the time away to gather my thoughts and relax with my daughter and our friends. My life required some sorting after the slight mess I’d made of it.

“Hey Mrs. Fraser,” Reagan Thompson, one of Bree’s friends greeted me upon entering the room. I’d known her since Bree was in pre-school, and it was quite amazing to watch all of these children grow up.

Her friends were lovely and helped out with the girls as often as they could. Reagan’s dad was a stay at home dad while her mother ran a law firm. “Hey Rey, how are you?” She recently returned from vacation.

She sat across from me with her chestnut colored curls fluttering behind her as a gentle sigh fell from her rosebud colored lips. “I’m okay,” she shrugged her shoulders. “My mom lost a baby.”
My heart went out to Mia Thompson. They tried for years to have a second baby.

“T’m sorry,” I slid my hands across the wooden tabletop to cover hers.

Her fingers were long, delicate, and quite small. I could imagine the pain her mother was suffering through, but I didn’t know what to say to comfort a young child. Her small features crumbled until she dissolved completely into tears. I rounded the table and drew into my embrace. “Shush, lovey it’s quite alright.” I rocked her as sobs overwhelmed her young body.

The soul bore the scars of loss. With each passing lifetime, new scars collected and were carried into each life. The other girls strayed away from the family room and gathered in the kitchen.

Eventually, Reagan pulled back, brushing away the tears. I pushed her hair away as I cupped her face. “I promise it’ll get better. I know you were looking forward to being a big sister, but sometimes life doesn’t work the way we want it to. It’s hard to understand at ten.” Lord knows I didn’t accept that until I was much older than her. “Right now, you should be there for your mom and dad. I’m sure they need you a lot.”

She nodded against my shoulder as her fingers dug into the skin around my ribs. “Thanks, Aunt Claire,” it should’ve occurred to me when I was addressed as Mrs. Fraser something was off in her demeanor.

I was a bit preoccupied however with the decisions I made in my own life recently, and lacked the skills to detect when others weren’t behaving as usual.

“Why don’t you go find Bree? She might have her own story to tell,” I patted her backside to move her along. “You can always come to me Rey.” Reagan briefly turned around to offer a smile before leaving the room to find Bree.

It was something I never desired to have in common with Mia. She was such a good friend and I would never wish such sorrow on my worst enemy. Her and Chris tried for ages and she had just made it into the second trimester. I wearily rubbed my brow as I thought about sending a flower arrangements and a card. When we returned from our holiday, I would pop by for a visit to cheer her up and ask if she needed anything.

Although I expected the answer to be no because I knew the loss she felt.

I buried my face in my hands and wondered not for the first time in the last month how I got here.

I still hear your voice in the middle of the night
I forget sometimes before I open my eyes
And the sun comes up, it's a long goodbye

2011

Dr. Meadows stared at me with those patient, understanding eyes of hers. She was keenly aware of my denial, et didn’t force me to come to any sort of realizations. Instead she provided me the space to work through my thoughts and somehow a breakthrough on my own was the real progress.

“Claire, tell me about what you wrote.” Dr. Meadows was around fifteen years older than me with a kind face. It was a little round as she’d recently given birth. The dark tinged circles under her eyes told the story of her sleepless nights, yet she appeared weekly at our sessions. Her caramel colored hair was pulled back into a casual French twist, her make-up soft and light.

I fingered the pages of my journal as I tried to find the words. My brain possessed them, but my
mouth refused to translate the struggle occurring inside of me.

“Every morning I wake up Jamie, and for those first few waking moments I’ve forgotten. I don’t remember the seemingly endless arguments, the constant disagreements over pointless things that mean nothing now. It’s in those innocent times when I open my eyes to the sun filtering through my curtains that I can still pretend.” The tears came steadily and fell onto the page creating a few ink smudges.

The smudges reminded me of my life with Jamie, a circle with blurred edges. We were a perfect circle in the beginning until the flood came and ruined it all.

I stared at them briefly before continuing to read the words that flowed onto the page. “The memories hurt worse each time. I remember how we stayed in bed until the absolute last second and talked about everything. The first time we woke up together, I was swept away in the wonderful feeling of your arms and the silly things we said. Then it hits me like a tidal wave. The memories unwind and play quickly through my brain, and then I’m saying goodbye to you all over again. My heart is breaking all over again, and I can’t stop it.”

Before I can continue, Dr. Meadows gently covered my hand with her own. Slowly, my eyes lifted to meet hers and I saw how I affected her with my words. The glassiness of her eyes clued me into how she tapped into the pain of my emotions.

She pried away the journal from my fingers before retreating to her side of the room. “Claire,” a sigh escaped her as she tried to figure out exactly what she said. I’d never seen her speechless before, and my heart constricted at the thought of breaking my therapist. She tucked an errant strand of hair as her eyes fixated on the notebook in her hands. “Does it hurt to write the letters? Please be as honest.”

If I couldn’t tell the truth, I chose not to speak because I decided to seek help because I needed to move on and recover from the trauma of 2009. I could hardly think on the years with any sort of positivity. It was a bleak year with endless days in which more than a few of them were spent begging for my own death.

“In the beginning, I felt like glass. It hurt each time and I broke each time. I shattered on the floor, but then it helped the more we continued. If I couldn’t tell him in person, I wanted it documented somewhere. It hurts more because I want it the way it was. I want to go back to the simplicity of our relationship, but I know it’s impossible. It’s like a hurricane. At first, it’s a light rain. Then it begins to complete pour with fast paced winds until it floods and trees are uprooted and nothing is like it was.”

She leaned back into her recliner as she absorbed the full impact of my words. “I want you to continue to write if you think it helps. Sometimes writing it down helps a person to let go. Issues remain unresolved if you,” she points her index finger in my direction. “Don’t have a conversation. You don’t actually need the other person to respond because the issues are more with yourself than with them. Unfortunately as humans, one of our problems is our inability to forgive ourselves for our perceived mistakes. I want you think about what I’ve said as you write to Jamie.”

And it rains till it pours, and it pours till it floods
And I am swept away by the way that it was
I can see your face and it hurts so much

JPOV

Her sea blue eyes stared at me with a hidden depth. While there was an innate sadness hidden in
her ocean orbs, I knew the emotions brewing underneath. She was lonely and lacking the people in her life who offered and provided comfort to her.

Her hand clung to mine as we entered the airport. There was giddiness in her vibrating body. In 48 hours, she would be across the Atlantic with her mam and sister.

Shyly, she peered up at me with an unasked question in her sparkling eyes. “Daddy, are you sure you’ll be fine?”

Bree was such a kind, headstrong soul who loved freely and fiercely. Her heart was gentle and she despised the thought of any poor soul in pain. “I’ll be fine baby girl.” I picked her up into my arms and her legs wrapped around my hips. “Soon enough I willna be able to do this anymore.”

A giggle ticked the small hairs of my ear and I relished in the youthful sound. “Are you going to miss me?” Her voice came out far more vulnerable than he expected.

The last several weeks were a strange mix of madness and fun as he spent individual time with his daughter for the first time since she was an infant. It was strange for him to realize she and Isla were two completely different people with such contrasting personalities that strangely worked well together.

On her own, Bree was different. She had a sunny personality, and could get quite cross when things didn’t work out the way she wanted. It was fascinating to be with her like this.

“I want to be taller.” She informed me cheerfully. “I want to be as tall as you.” Her arms squeezed tightly around my neck.

I placed her back on the ground and she beamed up at me. There was a small gap where she lost a tooth over the summer. I’d never played tooth fairy before, but I called Jenny and asked her about it. I placed a few pounds under her pillow. She crowed the next morning over breakfast about how the tooth fairy was international and brought different money depending on the location.

Recently, she decided on a haircut, and I was a bit hesitant to agree. Her gentle waves were gone and the tips of her hair barely brushed her shoulders.

“Dinna wish to grow so quick, aye?”

“Aye da,” she immediately agreed.

I couldn’t keep the grin off my face as she imitated the Scottish brogue. Neither of my girls were natural born citizens, nor had they spent any significant amount of time in Scotland, but they were quite talented at imitating mine or their mother’s accent.

Claire’s had lessened over the years, and had a hint of American in it. It wasn’t unpleasant, just strange to hear.

It was how I knew where she had made her home. She was a stronger woman who knew her place and had finally allowed herself to settle. Claire spent all those years searching for a home after the one she had was ripped apart by her father’s death. We made a home together, and it was one of the first times in a long time where she felt protected and loved, where she knew she belonged.

I sighed at the thought. I hadn’t heard from Claire since she left. Isla said her mam constantly worked and she was no longer seeing Peter. There was extra cheer in her voice as she delivered the news of the end of her mother’s relationship. It was never my intention for here to cease whatever happiness she had found because she deserved it.
I grasped her little hand as I rolled her suitcase. Her backpack was stuffed full of books and whatever else nine year old girls carried around with them. Bree found a bookstore and purchased several books about Scottish history, clans, and anything else that caught her interest. She fancied herself a junior historian.

“It’s my ancestors’ story daddy,” her eyes were wide and wanting. I couldn’t deny her, her heritage.

We walked to the ticket counter where we were met with Tom Beauchamp. “Hello Jamie,” he had such an easy going smile.

Everything always rolled off of him like rain. I’m sure he had his struggles like anyone, but Tom never allowed things to fester inside of him like his sister. He preferred honesty about his feelings and to express himself. It was such a contrast to Claire and almost refreshing.

“Good morning Tom,” we exchanged hugs and Bree grinned at him.

He pretended to be surprised at the sight of her. “Are you sure I have the right girl? She’s tall and skinny like a bean pole. I honestly think you’ve messed up mate.” He winked at her before lifting her up and spinning her around. “Look at you gorgeous girl,” he kissed her hair before setting her back on her feet. “You’ve grown so beautiful and tall. You don’t get that from your mother, but your looks definitely from our side.”

Bree giggled into her hands as she glanced at me not so covertly. “Alright my ruadh bhàn a ghalad,” I handed over her suitcase to Tom as I kneeled and took her hands into mine. “I’ve had such a wonderful summer with ye, and while it didn’t quite go to plan, I wouldna change a thing about it. We’ve had some fun, and I had ye all to myself. When ye get to yer Uncle Tom’s, I want ye to call me and before you leave tomorrow back to Boston.”

Her hair slid forward as she dover for my arms and I received a mouth full of ginger. I spit out her hair as my arms wrapped around her small body. It seemed impossible she was almost ten when I easily recalled the day she was born and how she barely fit in my arms, yet it seemed they were meant to hold her.

“Tha gaol agam ort,” she whispered into my ear and I nearly cried. I kent very well she loved me, but hearing it in my tongue was even better. “I practiced a lot this summer because I wanted you to know even though you’re far away, you’re still my daddy and I love you.” Her cheeks reddened at her admission. I couldn’t love her more if I tried.

“Thank ye Bree,” I gently tugged on a strand of her hair before gesturing for Tom to cut in. “I’m going to miss ye.”

Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears as she clutched tightly to her uncle’s hand. “Bye daddy,” her voice trembled as they headed for security.

I waved at her when she turned back towards me and nearly cried myself at the sight of her departing. I was alone again.

1 month later

I smelled the salt coming off the water and smiled as the memories washed over me. It was nearing the end of summer and soon enough the water would cool and wait until next year to warm once again.

“You know I would say you’ve got quite the bollocks.” A voice taunted.
I smirked as she joined me on the bench. “Why would ye say that?”

“Well you don’t call, text, or tell people about your plans.” Her eyes glittered with mischief as she joked with me. “A girl might start to get a complex when a guy calls her for the first time to tell her he’s completely gone mad.”

This woman was honestly too much. “I didna thing madness has taken possession of me.”

She scrutinized me carefully. “I would have to agree. You’re not the type to be motivated by such things. Instead you’re merely a fool in love, and you let love guide you all the way. It’s quite enviable actually because most people simply can’t allow themselves to live like that. You are a good man.” She squeezed my hand to let me know she meant it positively.

“Do ye think I’ve made the right decision?” I couldn’t keep the anxiety I experienced from coloring my tone. While I tended to the impulsive side of things and allowed life to carry me in multiple directions, I still felt the sensation of apprehension especially when there was a high probability of everything going wrong.

Her eyes softened slowly as she fully appraised me and I saw the worth shining back at me. “Well duh, I’ve been silently rooting for you all along.” There was a sort of calming effect associated with her, and I wondered what it was about her that allowed a person to easily bare their soul. She simply listened without the need to interrupt or speak, but presented a person with the opportunity to lay their perceived sins. “You’re a good Catholic man, and I know how much religion means to you.” She added with a meaningful look. “It’s one thing to attend church weekly, but you go to confession, you’re a god fearing man, and you allow him to guide you in life. I can appreciate that even if I don’t follow it myself.”

It seemed strange to hear someone explain me in such a way, but she was absolutely right. I lived by certain testaments in my life and I tried to listen when I could to the path god wanted me on. I didn’t always like where he led me, especially in recent memory as those places were filled with some of the lowest moments of my life.

“I didna mind being around her, in fact I preferred my life when she was near me. It was as if I could breathe for the first time in years. When my mother passed when I was twelve and my father when I was seventeen, it seemed as if my life wouldna be okay ever again.

“I met her in the in-between period and somehow with her there at my side, everything was made better. I felt as if I were whole again. “In the beginning, we were friends who told each other everything. We talked about losing a parent, siblings, school, our interests, and anything else we could think of at the time. I could talk to her for hours on end and never find myself bored.”
A wrinkle formed between her brow as she regarded my silently before jotting down some notes in her notebook. When our sessions first began, she was worried about my mental state in the aftermath of such a huge development in my personal life. The better part of a decade was with one person who constantly occupied my every living thought.

“Why do ye avoid talking about her when ye love her still? Does it still hurt to mention the profound impact you’ve had on one another and how much space in her life she occupied?”

I rubbed my sweaty palms onto the harsh fabric of my jeans. The world shrunk to the size of the office, and the world shone in clarity. All of my senses were heightened and I heard the tick of the clock, her breathing, my breathing, the scratch of the pen across paper, and so much else.

My eyes slid shut as I forced myself to concentrate on the provocative questions. I intended to deliver an answer to her, but the problem was I didn’t know how to answer truthfully.

My body and soul ached for Claire daily, and I imagined hers was the same way.

Divorce was never discussed between us until those last few months where the weight of the world nearly crushed us. Atlas couldn’t have stopped it from falling on us.

We were two individuals sailing off in different directions without knowing we were doing so until the gulf between us widened and stretch until it resembled something quite different from where we started. It was strange how that worked.

“Her name brings me unbearable agony, and when I hear Claire, I picture her face.”

“How does it make you feel?”

I’d go a million miles for the slightest chance
Of being near you, to hold your hand

I dug my nails into my palms and felt the sting of air on an open wound. It was how it felt to hear Claire’s name. Every time she was mentioned, it was the metaphorical salt. “It hurts so much. It’s hard because then the memories assault me. I dinna want to always remember the good and bad. It comes so soon and I canna prevent it. I hear her voice sometimes, and it pains me all over again because I kent very well where she is.” Blood trickled out of one of the crescent shaped marks, but I ignored it.

She folded her hands on her lap. “What do ye wish happened Jamie? I ken what occurred between ye, but do ye wish it had gone differently? Where do ye think ye’d be if it had?”

My eyes drifted close again as I thought about the relationship I shared with her. We had our highs and lows, and the lows nearly always obliterated us. The water kept rising and rising until we were basically drowning in our own love. “I’m not sure I’d change it at least how it all ended. The moments leading up to it, I would’ve behaved differently. I know I would still travel miles just to hold her hand or hear her voice. I just want to be around her, and sometimes in the haziness of the morning I forget. I’m convinced for a few moments, nothing has changed. Then it hurts again to realize how much it has changed.”

Her face remained impassive, but the air in the room thickened at my admission. She wasn’t all too sure what to say about my co-dependency. She made it clear she thought it was unhealthy, and we worked on ways for me to allow Claire to remain in the past instead of clouding my future. However, the problem was she was my future.

Every waking moment hurt because I constantly felt like I was breaking into tiny pieces, which
It's always too soon, it's always too fast
It hurts so hard breaking just like glass
When your heart hits the floor
And memories crash

“You’re one of a kind Jamie Fraser, I hope you’re aware not many are like you.” She nudged my shoulder softly. “I was jealous of you in the beginning. You leave quite an impression and a spot that’s not filled by anyone else.”

“Then how did I lose it all?”

A sad smiled appeared on her lips. “Fear, it’s quite powerful and sadly takes ahold of everyone at some point.”

I recalled the coldness that enveloped me then and how I allowed it to overwhelm me. I was scared and I permitted it to fester and take root inside of me until I pushed away the best thing to happen upon me. “Yer right, it blossomed and grew, and I couldna stop it. All sorts of thoughts passed through my head until soon enough I was doing things I’d never do. My actions hurt and had long lasting consequences not only for me but her and our daughters.”

A proud sort of look took up residence on her face as she peered at me. “When we are young, we do all sorts of stupid shit. We don’t have the life experience to know we are screwing up our lives and it’s entirely our fault. Being twenty something is essentially still being a child. You might have lived a bit, but you’re still maturing and trying to figure out your place in life and who you are. You had two kids, a wife in medical school, applying to residency programs with another child on the way, and a full time job to provide for all of you. It’s hard for anyone to cope.” I was always sort of embarrassed by the way I acted when I was twenty-five.

To most people, a twenty-five year old wasn’t all that different from a twenty year old. At the least, you were out of could for about three years. You’re still just beginning in your career. In hindsight, while I was a bit more mature than others my age, it was more a result of the direction my life had gone. Losing my mother and brother affected me deeply, and then to watch as my father suffered in the aftermath of his heart attack, I aged faster than most.

When I met Claire, it finally felt like I was the correct age. She gave me a fresh take on life and provided the hope and faith I was searching for in my life. She allowed me to be whoever I wanted and provided a sense of stability in my otherwise unbalanced existence.

“I think you’re a man with a lot more figured out now than ten years ago, and I think in the long run that’s what makes the true difference. Don’t screw it up. I’m not sure I can cheer you on a second time if you ruin it.” Her lips twitched as her greenish eyes danced merrily with mirth. She was enjoying herself at my expense. “Well I’ve got places to be and people to see.”

She held out her hand for me to shake, but instead I pulled her into a hug. “Thank ye,” I told her. Her eyes possessed confusion, but I shook my head as I’d explain it to her another time. “I’ve got to go, or else I’ll be late.”

“Good luck Jamie,” she sent a thumbs up my way before rushing down the street with her keys in hand.

It was now or never as I headed towards my own rental. “You can do this,” the whispered encouragement slid over my skin, warming me like a jacket to beat off the string of winter’s cold.
Like the day that we first met
When you smiled and that was it

-Maisy Stella

Chapter End Notes

I would apologize for the delay, but I've been going through some family issues. It's sort of been difficult to get into the writing mood. I'm not even sure how I finally got the words down on the page. I am sorry it took so long, but I definitely needed the time to gather myself a bit. Love all the support I've received and you guys are fantastic.
Rivers Between Us

Chapter Notes

The song used in this chapter is where I got the name of the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rivers between us are deep
and dark as the secrets we keep

J POV

The car slid into the parking spot with ease as I carefully observed my surroundings. I had never actually been here, but had been regaled with stories about the building before me.

I easily imagined all the tales told to me taking place here and saw all the potential. Cars lined up down the block as bodies exited quickly with hasty goodbyes and embarrassed kisses. Some people were on the sidewalk with tiny hands clutched in their own. Nervous expressions lined the faces of more than one adult as they escorted a small child into the building.

I saw the hair of a new fourth grader as she skipped merrily beside her mother. A floral aqua colored backpack was almost too big for her frame, but somehow it worked for her. The bag was filled with all of her school supplies and was nearly bursting with her belongings. I knew from our FaceTime call all about her new school supplies. It was one of her favorite things to do each year, especially as the years passed new supplies were added to the list. This year the teacher required black or blue pens.

Her plaid jumper complimented her skin quite nicely, and underneath she wore a short sleeved white blouse. It was green and blue, and she wore blue knee high socks. Her hair was placed in a ponytail with a blue ribbon, and I noticed it had grown a little bit in the month since she had gone home. A plaid hairband was placed on her head as well to match her jumper.

Bree’s mouth moved eagerly as she chattered away to her mother who smiled patiently down at her as they moved towards the school. It seemed a familiar routine for them, and I was suddenly nervous I was intruding on some sacred tradition.

I hesitantly took a deep breath before exiting the car and moving towards them. It was now or never, and I wanted to show my commitment not only to Claire but Bree as well.

As if she sensed my presence, bright red hair swung in a short ponytail as the owner’s head swiveled in my direction. Her eyes widened comically as her mouth stopped moving and she dropped her mother's hand before running in my direction. “Daddy!!” She screamed eagerly and a few heads turned in our direction, and more than one curious glance was sent my way by a few passing parents.

I caught Bree in my arms and held on tight to her petite form. I’d never had the opportunity to consistently marvel at the changes in the features of my children as I mostly saw the girls once a year because of scheduling. It was easy to note how in a few weeks she’d grown at least an inch taller. When a year passed there were always changes in the girls, and it scared me how easily a year passed.
It was the small differences that made it hit home just how much I’d truly missed with raising my
daughters and my heart ached for the lost time we could never recover. She pulled back to stare
me in the eyes. Her eyes were a storm of excitement and conflict. “What are you doing here?” A
divot formed between her brows as she considered the multitude of reasons for my sudden
appearance. I had never escorted her or her sister to school once since they began attending
school.

“Well, my little girl is in the fourth grade, and it is her last first day at the school she’s been
attending since she was four. I figured I should come for support.”

The crease deepened and in my peripheral I noticed how Claire fidgeted at my presence. There
was something off about her I couldn’t quite figure out.

Bree carefully deliberated my words before seeming to accept them. “Well you know fourth grade
isn’t that big of a deal,” she shrugged her shoulders self-consciously. “I mean next year is fifth
grade.”

“I’ll be there then as well.” I knew what she was hinting at with her words, and I was providing
her the reassurance she sought. Whether or not Claire and I worked out, I was remaining in
Boston to watch my daughters grow up and to actively partake in raising them instead of
performing the task from afar.

Her arms wrapped tightly around my neck and I felt her hot tears as she buried her face in the
crease of my neck. I kissed her hair, doing my best not to muss her hair. Slowly, she slid down as
if suddenly realizing where she was.

Her face warmed as she peered around. I supposed it was embarrassing to be caught embracing
your father once you reached a certain age, and I guessed nine was where it was no longer cool.
She grabbed my hand as her eyes caught mine. They were a beautiful shade of blue that was
purely hers. “Come on, mommy is waiting. School doesn’t start for twenty more minutes, but I
want to introduce you to some of my friends. Let’s go,” she ushered me over to her mother.

I didn’t have much time to say anything to Claire aside from a greeting. I felt her questioning gaze
on me as we walked the halls of the school. I easily imagined the walls decorated with student
artwork as the school year progressed. Bree pointed out her former classrooms to me as she waved
at her old teachers.

Lots of people stared as we passed by, and I realized it was more than likely the result of knowing
Claire and Bree. I kent that despite her busy work schedule, she was an involved parents and
came to just about every school function.

The teachers gawked as we passed, and I knew many of them more than likely had Isla as well as
there was only one teacher for each grade pre-k-5. I waved awkwardly at them, but mostly
ignored them.

We finally reached her classroom. Bree dropped our hands as she rushed to a group of girls who
threw their arms around one another and squealed loudly. I’d heard stories about her friends, but it
was the first time I was confronted with the realization they truly had a life. Bree had gone to
school with most of these girls since pre-k/kindergarten.

Her mouth and theirs moved rapidly as they caught up with one another, though I doubted it had
actually been long since they last seen one another from what Claire had told me. Bree gestured at
me without actually looking at me, but I saw as her friends stared at me with gaping mouths.

What seemed an agonizing slow pace was perhaps a few seconds before they surrounded me.
“Daddy, I want to introduce you to my friends.” Her eyes were wide as she began her introductions. “This is Katie,” a blonde girl waved nervously at me from Bree’s left side. “This is my bestest friend ever Reagan,” she had chestnut colored hair and it was braided into two Dutch braids. Loose curls softly framed her face. I’d heard a lot about the little girl from Bree’s calls and all the summers she’d visited me. “This is Lucy, but we call her Luce.” Lucy was a strawberry blonde with similarly colored eyes as my own daughter. She had far more freckles than either of my children. She was the shortest of the group as well, just barely coming passed Bree’s shoulder.

The girls all greeted me with a polite hello before excusing themselves as they flittered around the classroom.

A woman a few years older than Claire and myself appeared before us, and Claire chatted with her. I realized belatedly it was the teacher. “This is Jamie Fraser, Bree and Isla’s father. Jamie, this is Mrs. Nicholson. She was Isla’s teacher as well.”

Mrs. Nicholson had a few lines around her eyes, but a kind and welcoming smile. She held out her hand, which I firmly grasped. “Good morning Mr. Fraser, it’s lovely to meet you. Your daughter Isla was such a delight to have in class. She’s in seventh grade now?” Her voice was tentative, but she sounded mostly sure.

“Yes, she’s at Newton County Day, and she adores the school.” Claire replied. “She’s turning into such a beautiful young woman. This is Bree, our youngest,” Bree stood nervously in front of her mother and twitched a little as her mother gently placed her hands on her shoulders. “This is her last year here.”

Mrs. Nicholson smiled delightedly. “I remember at the awards ceremony last year you won a special academic achievement award. You seem like such a bright young girl.”

Bree’s face transformed before my very eyes as she suddenly stood taller with her chest slightly puffed out. “I achieved the highest marks in the third grade.” I hadn’t known about the award as it had never come up in any of our conversations over the summer.

Soon enough we were saying goodbye to Bree as other parents began their departure as well. I knew she was in good hands, and she waved us goodbye while shooing us out the room as well to begin her first day.

We stand on the shores
    time runnin’ by at our feet
    Oh, the rivers between us are deep

We were standing outside the school soon enough, and Claire hesitated over what to say. There was indecision carefully displayed on her face as she debated over several courses of action. “Jamie, I have something I’d like to show you before we have any conversations. Would you mind following me?” I shook my head in reply.

She nodded simply as she headed towards her sleek SUV. She always drove a regular four door sedan in the past, but I supposed the girls were older and had a lot more things to pack in the car.

I read her plates and bit back a smile: I06B08. She had the girls’ first initials and their birth years.

It wasn’t until we were nearly at our destination, I recognized exactly where I was. I almost turned back more than once, but I made a promise to her. I couldn’t go back on another one.

I followed her through the gates and along the winding road with rows of stones each with a person gone.
My eyes watered painfully as I refused to blink because I knew as soon as the rain came, it would flood with my tears. I couldn’t allow a downpour because I wasn’t sure if I could get it to stop if I started. I hadn’t visited since the day we left him here.

Her car slowed until she parked on the side of the road. I parked mine behind hers, and I saw the day again almost like a movie playing inside of me head.

“Jamie,” Jenny called softly to me, her voice a soothing caress. “Are ye ready?” Her dark blue eyes were wet, her cheeks flushed, and everything about her demeanor somber.

Of course it was, I thought bitterly. I hadn’t enjoyed a single happy thought since I woke up. Almost immediately upon opening my eyes, I was swept away with an assault of memories. I recalled the phone call about my wife in the hospital, delivering our child. The pre-eclampsia caused her to deliver far too early, and Gabriel wasn’t developed enough to survive outside of her womb.

When I laid my eyes on the tiny, carefully wrapped infant, I wept.

The tears flowed until I was sobbing into his cold skin. I would never hear his heartbeat outside of his mother, or hear his first words. I wouldn’t watch him take his first steps, or as he fed from his mother’s breast. He wouldn’t have any firsts, not even a tiny puff of air would escape his lips.

His tiny features were birdlike, and there was no telling who he’d look like. His head had no hair, but I imagined he would’ve had tufts of brown fuzz. His skin should’ve been a nice peachy color with flushed cheeks.

Instead in my hands was a baby that never lived. Gabriel was only an idea, and every morning I hesitated to wake because my dreams were far better than reality.

As soon as Claire left the hospital, I checked into a hotel because I couldn’t bear to see her face. I felt responsible for the loss of our child. If I’d been there instead of out of town, I could’ve gotten her to the hospital. Yet, I was off on some trip with a co-worker who I knew had feelings for me. I’d done nothing to full discourage her efforts, but I knew I’d never actually do anything with her. I was too far gone for my wife.

Claire wasn’t wrong when she accused the woman of having ulterior intentions, but I refused to acknowledge it. If she was right, what else was she right about? Were we quickly heading toward the edge? The fire was burning, but through the smoke I could no longer see her there beside me in the blaze.

Our love is like the moon
rising too fast, fading too soon

In the haze of the smoke she disappeared and I coughed alone. Claire was still asleep when they showed me my son.

I cried for her, us, our family because there wasn’t a way to escape the unbearable pain of losing a child. It didn’t matter if we’d never met him. He was ours and then he was God’s. My eyes burned with the ferocity of my tears. I sniffled as I imagined the warmth his tiny body would’ve emanated. I pictured it easily after knowing his sisters as infants. The way his body would’ve molded to my own form as he buried his face in the warmth of my chest, seeking the solace of a parent’s comfort.

I saw him chasing after his screaming sisters. Isla and Bree would’ve undoubtedly spoiled him and forced him into their games. He would’ve pestered them as they all aged and tried to spy
when they no longer wanted to spend time with him.

A drop fell onto his perfect, unmov ing face. I saw him learning how to ride a bicycle, asking for advice about kissing girls, punching any boys who dared to mess with his sisters, and countless other events he’d never have a chance at.

Slowly but surely, I lowered my head to tenderly place my lips on the cold skin of his forehead. For a moment I convinced myself he was alive, but it was all in my head.

I gingerly tucked the blanket tighter around him before placing him back down. As soon as Claire awoke, they would bring him to her if she asked. The birth was quite the traumatic experience for her, and she nearly bled out as a result. She almost died, yet I was out there angry at her because of the row we’d had before I departed.

Jenny flew in by herself, leaving the kids in the care of Ian. She told me she couldn’t allow me to go through this by myself as she’d attended every other funeral in my life by my side and my son would be no exception.

She placed my clothes out for me as I’d barely found the motivation to roll out of bed. The last several days had been too much for me to process let alone handle. Claire rejected my calls, refused my visits, and I stopped trying. In her mind, she associated Gabriel’s death with my actions, and I couldn’t say I wasn’t feeling that unbearable guilt myself. It nearly crushed me. I deserved the blame for what happened because I wasn’t there when she needed me most.

It squeezed and tugged and pulled me further down. No one was blaming me (at least to my face), but I blamed myself. I hurled accusations at Claire since she revealed the pregnancy to me several months before. I’d told her she trapped me and she’d done it all on purpose.

I drowned in my own guilt in the aftermath of that particular fight. The light in her eyes immediately extinguished as her shoulders slumped, and her face finally succumbed to the tears she held at bay. She excused herself from my presence before entering the bedroom and closing the door with a soft click. I heard the lock and then the painful, raw sobs that escaped her.

The next morning she went about as if nothing occurred, but somehow there was a wall in our relationship. It was one I couldn’t penetrate no matter how hard I tried. A layer of frost covered her, and nothing I did melted it.

She tensed at my touch until I removed my hand. She slept as far from me as she could in our bed. She spoke to me when necessary.

Perhaps I didn’t deserve my child. I hadn’t wanted him in the beginning, and told his mother it was a mistake. We didn’t need another child to worry about when the two we had weren’t even fully capable of conversations. A third child at that point in time was not a blessing despite what the Church said.

It was in the aftermath of it all that the full impact of my words hit me. No matter what a child was a blessing, regardless if it was planned or not. By our actions, Claire and I conceived him, he hadn’t chosen us. We created him, and we were supposed to protect him; I failed miserably in that regard.

I did nothing but constantly disappoint his mother with my inability to be anything but happy and positive about the pregnancy. I hadn’t meant the words in the slightest, but the thing about words is once they’re spoken, you can’t ever truly take them back. They are always there in the spaces between a marriage. They’re there in all of the unspoken arguments and the rift of our bodies at night. The devastation in her eyes rocked me like a house during an earthquake. No matter how
many times I apologized for my thoughtless, callous words I’d said the words I knew would hurt her the most. The problem with words said in anger is some part of you always means them.

Regret almost immediately washed over me like a cool balm, but Claire’s defenses rose in place. I could almost see an ancient castle gate sliding down preventing anyone from hurting her further.

Which brought us to this particular moment where we had to bury our child in the earth. We were officially giving him to God and the angels for protection, and he was no longer ours to nurture and take care of. We had to accept our shortcomings and failures and set it all aside for the funeral.

I dressed myself on autopilot as I held back the sobs threatening to burst from my chest. There was an emptiness inside myself that I had no idea how to fill. It was just there the moment I let go of my son.

Jenny tried to force a smile for me, but it came off as more of a grimace than anything. I appreciated the effort, but I didn’t want her to coddle me today of all days. I wanted to freely feel the pain of my son’s death without anyone attempting to soothe me. I needed this. I had to do it alone.

I nearly collapsed when I caught my first glimpse of the coffin. It was unbearably tiny, and coffins that size shouldn’t even exist. The body inside was even smaller, and I was devastated. It took everything in me not to fall to my knees and wail and rage at God for the unfairness.

I sat on one side of the aisle and Claire on the other. It was my river metaphor all over again. We couldn’t even manage to be together in the aftermath of losing our son. She had her support system and I had mine. Our paths no longer connected but forked and we took our own paths to wind up on opposite sides of the same river.

Claire’s hair was pulled back into a simple knot with a few curls escaping. Her black dress was simple, and she wore the barest amount of make-up. It was enough to cover the puffy, dark circles under eyes and cover the redness of her face. There was such total and utter devastation on her face that I honestly didn’t know what to do. It felt like all my prayers had gone nowhere. Was God there? Did he hear them? Was he even listening to me anymore?

What happened was the last thing I would ever want for Claire, yet somehow here we were. After knowing how her father’s death affected the rest of her life, I never wanted her to suffer through losing someone like that again. Sort of stupid in retrospect as I can’t prevent what life has in store, and I certainly can’t circumvent someone’s death. While I still fully believed God had a plan for all of us, it was hard to reconcile that belief with my son’s death.

Was he never meant to live? Was he always meant for the angels? Were we meant to mourn what we couldn’t have?

Somehow I made it through. I made my way to the front when it was time to read my poem about the loss of a baby. I swallowed back hot tears and managed to keep my face neutral. A few tears dripped onto the paper, but I continued to read until I finished every stanza.

It was through my teary gaze I truly saw her. She was an ethereal being with her flushed cheeks set against her ivory colored skin. Her loose curls perfectly framed her face, and her wet cheeks made her seem almost otherworldly. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen in her grief.

It was after I finished when I lost all purpose for life. How was life fair? Why did some live when others never had a chance to breathe?
This night will soon be gone
help me hold on

I was bereft as it all seemed to caught up to me at once and I found myself gasping for air through my choking, gasping sobs. Jenny rushed to my side immediately to hold me up and get me far from here and this moment. I saw Claire’s arms twitch as if she wanted to be the one holding me instead of Jenny, but I think it was my imagination playing tricks on me and me seeing what I wanted.

Jenny and I sat in the car and she held me in her arms like she had at our mam’s funeral. She rubbed my back like one of her bairns as she allowed me to simply cry. “It’s okay, yer gonna get through this. Ye’ll be stronger for it. Shh…” my cries tapered off, but I stayed there in her embrace as people began to depart. “Do ye want to go back?”

I shook my head in the crook of her neck. She reminded me of home. “Chan eil, I just want to stay here a bit longer.” I felt her lips in my hair and sighed. It was like I was a boy again when I ran to her room during thunderstorms. She always opened her blankets for me and allowed me to cling to her.

When I finally made it back to the site, Claire was sitting there by herself. She was huddled inside of her coat and it was as if she were trying to make herself as small as possible, more than likely wishing away her existence. I understood the feeling very well. She stared at the fresh mound of dirt piled upon our son’s grave. He was under there, and we were up here without him.

Did he know us? Was he sad he wasn’t to be with us? All of these questions continued to float through my head as I stared.

I made my way over to her where I hesitantly placed my hand on her shoulder unsure if she’d be receptive to my touch or not. Tears blurred my vision, but the time for crying wasn’t there yet. Her eyes connected with mine and I saw the same things I was feeling reflected in her glassy eyes.

There are kingdoms to keep us apart
so we live out our lives in the dark
Love has a way of making you pay with your heart
There are kingdoms to keep us apart

I cleared my throat, not sure if I even possessed the ability to speak still. “Come on Claire,” I told her. “Ye should be home,” with our girls went unspoken.

She slowly placed her hand in mine and allowed me to lead her away from this place of hurt and despair, and away from our son. Somehow we both looked back at the spot where our baby boy was buried and a fresh round of tears began. He was really there instead of inside of his mother’s belly where he would’ve been safe and warm. We somehow made it inside of my car where Jenny was ready behind the wheel to take us from here, from where we left a part of ourselves.

I slowly exited my car as I stared in the general direction where I knew he lay under the ground. The last time was here, there wasn’t a headstone. It was still being prepared, and I refused to visit the day they placed it over his grave.

Claire appeared by my side and offered her open hand to me. We would do this together.

We both carried around a mountain of guilt about the events preceding and succeeding her miscarriage. In our own right, we both believed it was entirely our fault, but maybe Claire was right and it wasn’t either of our faults.
We walked at a snail’s pace, and Claire seemed to know without words that it was a process. She intuitively knew it was a struggle for me to finally be here, but perhaps she knew it was a step we both needed. I had to finally come to terms with everything. She had already told me she came here on her own and with the girls to visit Gabriel. His own dad hadn’t come to see him since the day we left him here.

Her hand slipped out of mine as we approached the grave. I was grateful to her for providing me the time alone with him.

I fell to my knees at the headstone as a dam of tears burst from me. He was here, My fingers traced the letters of his name.

Gabriel Thomas Fraser

He was my only son, but I somehow couldn’t find it in me to visit him until this moment. I don’t think I was ready before to acknowledge the loss I felt deep inside of my bones. It was hard for me to admit how much his loss truly affected me, and how I handled subsequent relationships. I showered my girls in love and attention, but at the same time it was easy to keep them at a distance. I couldn’t hurt them if there was an ocean between us.

In our hearts is where you’ll be

I bit my lip at tears silently dripped down my face. It was almost too much for me because he was a child of my heart. It was the only place he existed.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose the minute she was in close proximity. She had given me my time, but ultimately it was about healing the both of us. I reached out for her and she slid herself into my embrace. Her head tucked itself under my chin, her spot.

“Why did ye not put a date?” My head tilted down towards her her.

Her eyes held the sorrow she still carried. I squeezed her hand. “I couldn’t bear it. He deserved better than us, and I know he’s in heaven.” She sniffled against my chest and I felt my shirt dampen. My lips pressed a soft kiss to her hair.

We sat on the ground, comforted by the sounds of people visiting their long gone relatives. Flowers populated the area, and I noticed there was a fresh bouquet on Gabriel’s.

I played with her long fingers. “It’s hard to believe he would be about nine years old.”

The dam burst forth and I held her close as she sobbed. All the anguish, hurt, and love she buried away was purged from her as we finally mourned our loss together. “I couldn’t look at him when they offered at first.” She admitted vulnerably. “Then I changed my mind because I wanted to know he had been real. I thought I failed him. It wasn’t until later after talking with my therapist and my ob/gyn I came to truly understand that these things happen. I was a doctor.” She sighed softly. “I suppose in my profession we tend to make terrible patients and we have a harder time accepting what we can’t change.”

I didn’t want to tell her that it was in her nature prior to her profession to not accept she couldn’t change everything, but I felt it would be pointless. It would be like beating a dead horse.

“So what now?” I murmured into her hair. Her presence was like a drug. The more I was with her, the more I wanted her.

She turned around with a perplexed look. “What do you mean?”
“I mean between us.” I gestured to our current position.

“I suppose I should tell you what’s happened since I came back home with Isla but before Bree returned.” I nodded. “I broke up with Peter.” She confessed, although I had already known from Bree, Isla, Jenny, and Mel. “I was gutted, but not enough not to do it. It was what I needed, yet I knew we would never have the loud, forever kind of love we shared. The kind where I’m breathless the moment we kiss, or I miss you as soon as you’re gone. I’m not demeaning what I had with him because it was special, and he was there for me. But if I had to pick one man to spend the rest of my life and after with well…” She trailed off uncertainly.

I frowned at her. “Well what?” I demanded at her coyness.

Her eyes were focused intently on mine, and I hadn’t noticed how close her face was to mine until her lips were a breath from my own. “It would always be you,” she said as her lips found my own. I savored the taste of her and relished in the feel of her pressed up against me. Her skin was warm and velvety, but I knew we couldn’t push it. We were in a cemetery at our son’s grave. We had to have some propriety.

I pulled back from her with a goofy grin plastered on my own. “What are you doing here though?” I figured she would eventually ask me. “I mean we had kind of said our goodbyes and resolved ourselves to the fact we couldn’t be together.”

“Well, I dinna want to lose ye again. Distance is a problem easily remedied. I couldna bear to not have ye, and if ye are willing, I want to try again.”

Her eyes widened dramatically, and it would’ve been almost comical except for the serious look that overcame her. “There’s something we need to talk about, but I don’t have the time at the moment. My shift at work starts soon. My students are waiting, and I was only taking off a little bit to help the girls prepare for the first day back at school.”

“Oh…” I replied unsure of what to do next. It hadn’t occurred to me that she would have to work. Although it really should’ve. Claire was a workaholic and perfectionist in everything she did.

Her expression morphed once again as her face brightened. “How about you drop by for lunch? I get actual time for that instead of the maybe fifteen minutes during my residency, and we can talk then. All you have to do is drop by the nurses’ station and they’ll direct you to my office. Does that work for you?” Her expression was earnest and open.

I nodded my head as her mind roamed about a million miles. What did she need to tell me that could possibly affect our fledgling relationship?

Our love is like the moon
rising too fast, fading too soon
This night will soon be gone

CPOV

I left him at the cemetery as I only had an hour to make it into work, and I was some distance away from the hospital. The morning had sort of gotten away from me with his sudden appearance. I had resigned myself to the inevitable, which was we weren’t going to work in this lifetime.

It was an utter shock to the system to find him standing there outside of Bree’s school, and more than surreal to stand beside him as we talked to her teacher. I knew we would be the talk of the parent and staff community by the end of the day. It was a well known fact the girls only saw their
father in the summer, and it wasn’t a big school by any means.

That was another headache I would have to deal with at some point. I didn’t want any sorts of false rumors spreading as parents tended to talk when little ears could hear. I didn’t want this to hurt Bree at all by falsehoods. The school community was quite gossipy and far too small for something like this to slide by unnoticed.

I scrubbed my face in irritation because this was such an intricate process, one that couldn’t be solved easily. There were so many facets to my relationship with Jamie. We had almost twenty whole years of history that we couldn't simply disregard, but we were also starting over too. It wasn’t from scratch as we were familiar with the general outline of one another, yet there was almost a decade in there in which we barely communicated with one another. Our exchanges were purely through phone calls, texts, and emails. I avoided any sort of face to face contact because I couldn’t bare to see him. While I wished happiness for him, I didn’t want to be faced with the reality of it. It was strange almost knowing a person, but with some missing blanks thrown in there as well.

While I admired him making the first step easier, bridging the distance between us, where we could finally cross over to each other's side of the river, we couldn’t pick up where we left off. We had to be realistic about our expectations including how we wanted to renew our relationship. It would take effort on our parts, and perhaps a professional should be involved as well. I wanted it to last this time, and I was self-aware enough to know myself. I was a creature of habit and almost always fell back into the same patterns and routines. If we wanted true change, we needed to be proactive about it instead of reactive as we had in our youth.

The problem was I couldn’t control my nerves either. I was terrified about our prospects in the long term, and the fear was overwhelming me. It was a crushing force, and I felt the cold tendrils of doubt creep under my skin. Were we made to last? Could we successfully do it this time or were we doomed from the start? I had been accused of thinking too much in the past, and I knew it was the case now as well.

I tapped my fingers impatiently as I waited in traffic. According to the radio, there was an accident on the interstate up ahead, but I knew once I passed whatever it was, I would just barely make it to the hospital. I had to hope people were not gawking at whatever tragedy befell some poor soul. My interns were probably getting a little nervous and twitching all over the place, wondering when I would appear. They were sort of terrified/intimidated by my mere presence, very few of them had the gumption to start a conversation with me.

I honestly didn’t mind though because I sort of enjoyed their skittish movements and their stuttering words.

“Hello,” I answered after pushing the phone button on the wheel.

The silence on the other side answered all of my questions about who was calling. “Come on, we’ve been through this. I know you’re upset about it all, but what do you want me to do?” I asked the caller seriously. We had gone through this several times in the past several weeks, and I was tiring of the repeated phone calls that have gone nowhere. The end result was the two of us usually breathing heavily after some particularly vigorous rows.

“Give me a good reason why.” He replied angrily. “Everyone around the hospital is gossiping about me because clearly there was more to you breaking it off with me.” I knew he was seeking answers about what seemed to him my sudden desire to end our relationship. “I wanted to marry you. I still do. What changed?” I had no way to properly explain the feelings coursing inside of me, or how I knew if I'd accepted and married him it would've been a mistake.
I wanted to bury my face in my hands, but my current driving circumstances prevented that from happening. “Peter there isn’t any answer I could give you that you’d like.”

He blew out a harsh breath through his teeth. I imagined his jerky movements as he sat in his office. He was probably rifling through patient files with pinched lips and blazing eyes. I couldn’t tell him about Jamie because it wasn’t the entire reason. I wanted more out of a relationship than to simply be comfortable with someone. I loved him, and while I couldn’t necessarily compare the two of them, the love was definitively different.

“God damnit Claire, is there someone else? I think I deserve that much.”

“Have you ever truly been in love before Peter? I’m talking just thinking about them causes you to have goose pimplles all over and butterflies to erupt in your stomach. You miss them even when they’re in the next room. You think about them so much, you wonder how you even have time to miss them in the first place. And it’s loud. The love between you and the other person is so loud and vivacious, the world suddenly is in color. Before you met them you only saw black and white, and with them in your life there are these colors you can’t even name but they now exist. A music sort of exists between you and hums whenever you touch.”

There was silence on the other end of the line, and I knew I had given him a pause to think. He had a lot to contemplate because I was sure he had never really felt those sorts of things for me. If he had well then I was sorry for the way things had gone between us, but I hadn’t known three months ago that this would ultimately be where our relationship ended. I never wanted to hurt him, but my selfishness and inability to accept I was still in love with the guy I pushed away caused me not to realize how unfair I was being to Peter. I don’t think I used him because my feelings had grown for him, and I had always been upfront with him.

I knew the love we had could never fully compare to what I shared in the past. I loved him so much, but it wasn’t the sort of in love feeling I experienced with Jamie. We never had that deep connection that allowed you to sense what your partner was feeling or the ability to have nonverbal conversations. Sometimes I even had a deep sinking feeling in my gut when I knew something bad was going to happen to Jamie.

It wasn’t like that with us, and if the incident with Isla had never occurred I would’ve accepted his proposal. I had wanted to share my life with him, but after rediscovering the spark with Jamie, it was impossible to go back to something that wasn’t as strong.

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Peter wasn’t the top of his class at MIT for nothing. He was highly intelligent and had quite the deductive reasoning skills.

I sighed sadly as I truly didn’t want to tell him he wasn’t enough. “Did you ever feel something was missing?” I had on multiple occasions, but I passed it off as me looking for something that was no longer mine.

“No, Claire I envisioned it all with you. You made me feel like a whole person for the first time in my life, and I always relished when you were near. You made me so happy with a casual smile thrown my way. Everyday felt like a new opportunity to try and impress you to show you how much I loved you.”

I wasn’t going to cry. I couldn’t. I didn’t deserve the right to do that after having destroyed this man. Break ups may happen all the time, but it doesn’t stop the gut wrenching guilt in my stomach. “Peter, it was never my intention to hurt you. I hope you’re aware of that. I didn’t know until I came back how much I was missing. You loved me. That’s true. But you never just wanted me. I wanted to feel wanted, desired even. That’s not how you viewed me, and don’t you dare say it is.” I wiped away a tear because of how true my words actually were.
He was silent yet again as he thought about what I said. “You never told me you felt that way.” I heard the sadness creep into his voice. I’d not only embarrassed him at his place of work, but I broke his heart. “I truly loved you. Bye Claire.”

“Bye Peter,” he already had clicked off before I could finish. The guilt hit me in waves at how I ruined this man. I hoped he could find love again one day.

Somehow I had made it to the hospital without wrecking my car. I went through my regular routine and allowed my brain to operate on autopilot. I was sort of in a daze when there was a knock on my office door. “Come in,” I called absentmindedly, completely forgetting I invited Jamie to lunch.

His eyes roamed my shelves of medical books and journals, the pictures place strategically around the room until they finally landed upon me.

“Hello,” I said shyly to him.

A tentative grin formed on his lips. “So lunch?”

“Yes,” I said, grabbing his hand as we headed out in the unknown.

\[ \text{help me hold on} \]
\[ \text{Help me hold on...} \]

*The Rivers Between Us, Connie Britton & Chip Easten*

Chapter End Notes

If any of you guys are on Twitter, you are welcome to talk to me. I love meeting new people on there. My twitter is jmoonrise95.
Try

Chapter Summary

What does Claire have to tell Jamie?

Chapter Notes

Hello my lovely readers, you guys are honestly the best. I love reading your comments and responding back because I see how invested you guys are. I can't believe we are at chapter 20 already, and almost at 100,000 words. Thanks for supporting me and my story, and I wouldn't be posting if you guys weren't so awesome.

Ever wonder 'bout what he's doing
How it's all turned to lies
Sometimes I think that it's better,
To never ask why

CPOV

“Do you mind if we go to my house for lunch?” What I had to tell him was something meant for private ears, and I didn’t want to be in a public venue when I told him. His reaction could be one of several and I had no way of knowing which he might go for after I told him. We were finally meeting on a bridge, but at any moment it could crumble between us.

He nodded his assent. “Should I follow ye in my car?” He was quite unsure about what to do, but I smiled and shook my head at him. Without his presence over the last two months, I’d had time to do a lot of thinking and I didn’t particularly want any distance between us.

If he wanted some after I told him my news, I would understand. “Ride with me. I’ve got to come back here afterwards anyways.” I was working until late tonight, covering another coworker’s shift as they were out sick.

My eyes slid slyly in his direction as he buckled his seatbelt. It was odd in a way to watch him in my car because I had pictured him beside me hundreds of times in the past, but I knew it could never come to fruition. I wasn’t exactly sure if reality was better or not. I supposed it would depend on how our lunch went.

As soon as he was buckled, my eyes flitted to the windshield and my cheeks warmed suspiciously. I didn’t want him to see that I was watching him.

Every few seconds my eyes darted to his muscular frame, and I couldn’t help but admire how he physically changed over the years. Jamie had always had more of a lean musculature in his youth, but it seemed in our time apart he worked on developing his muscles. They were quite nice to look out.
With him in the car, I was trying with some difficulty not to get distracted because he did that to me. All of my senses and nerves heightened as soon as he was in a close vicinity to me. I always knew when he was near almost as if I could feel his breath on my neck or hear the pounding of his heart. His touch was electrifying, and when our skin connected I was lost. I couldn’t resist the magnetic pull I felt towards him.

I wanted to rip off his clothes or pull his head to mine and feel my fingers run through his silky curls. Well, maybe that was hormonal or something, but I definitely wouldn’t mind his body pressed against me with nothing between us. I sighed pathetically because we needed to take it slow as there was a lot more at risk now. We had two children who were at impressionable ages and our decisions could negatively impact their ability to have healthy relationships in the future.

“What’s on yer mind Sassenach?” I attempted to ignore the way my heart skipped a beat at the endearment, yet I nearly melted into the seat. “I can see ye are thinking hard about something over there with your big brain, and I dinna want ye to strain yerself.”

Hearing the title brought back hundreds if not thousands of memories of us in all sorts of places. I wanted the comfort and ease which once guided our relationship back because it wasn’t always awkward between us. There was a time when I held not a single doubt about this man, but time had built insecurity around my heart until I no longer knew down from up let alone how to speak to him without feeling tense. Jealousy blossomed and grew in my heart and suspicion replaced trust in my brain.

Quite a leap to make, but what was I supposed to think when he spent more than the regular 9 to 5 in the office, especially after I found Britney giving him a massage.

Where there is desire, there is gonna be a flame
Where there is a flame, someone's bound to get burned
But just because it burns, doesn't mean you're gonna die
You gotta get up and try, and try, and try
Gotta get up and try, and try, and try
You gotta get up and try, and try, and try

March 2009

Things were strained between us, but I was hoping a family outing could help us bond as a family and Jamie and I work on some of the issues in our relationship. Ever since I dropped the baby news on him, he’d been distant, or perhaps that was me.

I certainly wanted no part of him when he returned to the apartment after I told him I was pregnant. His reaction to the news was appalling, and while I understood the shock he was experiencing, I despised him for simply walking out the way he did. I had no way of knowing if he’d return or not, and he left his phone so there was no way to contact him. I spent the remainder of the night crying into my pillow because we’d screwed up again, and this time it might actually destroy our marriage. Jamie certainly hadn’t planned on another one anytime soon. We were already on tenterhooks and at any moments could fall.

The girls were certainly easy to get dressed. Isla stood there patiently for once and did as I asked when I told her to raise her arms or lift her legs so I could pull up her pants. She was such a good girl, and most of the time was quite obedient.

Bree enjoyed kicking her chubby legs and blowing spit bubbles as I dressed her. She wriggled on the changing table and tried to roll herself over the edge. She was a little worm who couldn’t stay in place. She smiled at me as if she knew what she was doing, and my heart swelled with love for the tiny being before me.
I loved her so much, and I worried endlessly before she was born if I could love her as much as her sister. While I read books about second children, it still gnawed at me that I simply might be unable to muster as much love for her. It was all for naught because as soon as they placed her in my arms, I knew I’d love her just as much. My heart expanded and welcomed this new addition. Nothing could ever make me stop loving either of my daughters. I would do anything to protect and love them for the rest of my days.

Bree’s sunny smile never failed to make my day. Even when I was frazzled with frizzy hair, unkempt clothes smelling eerily of vomit, and dark circles under my eyes, my children made it all the struggles and problems in my life completely worth it.

I wouldn’t exchange a single day with them for anything.

Isla’s eyes stared precariously out of the car window as the city passed by in her eyes. They weren’t the same exact shade as her father’s. They were a bit darker like her aunt Jenny’s. Her hair also darkened from the strawberry blonde fuzz that started on her head when she had grown some. Originally she was bald as a cue ball.

It had fallen out only to come back a deep auburn color. Jamie was delighted as no one in his family had dark red hair, at least not in a few generations. It certainly hadn’t come from my side of the family as we were all brunettes and blondes.

Her hair was far straighter than either of ours. She was her own little mosaic. She had all the best parts of us.

The outside world fascinated her curious mind, and I often found her openly observing the people around us as if she was trying to understand. I could picture tiny cogs moving inside of her head.

Bree, I knew was asleep, otherwise she’d scream up a storm as she didn’t enjoy being confined. Her energy was a restless sort, and she much preferred rolling around on her baby blanket or preparing herself for some sort of movement. I knew soon enough she’d be pulling herself up, preparing for her first steps. She wasn’t one to allow the world to slow down for her, but wished to be in on the action. Perhaps I was reading too much into her behavior thus far, but I was learning quite fast. They were both so different, and their personalities were complete opposites.

I pulled into the parking lot and went through the arduous process of waking up a fussy Bree. Isla waited patiently in her seat for me to release her and then stood at my side as I unbuckled her sister. “Ma, see da?” Her eyes were wide and trusting.

I nodded my head as moved Bree’s arm out of the strap. She whined unhappily as I struggled. “Yes, we are going to see Daddy. I’m hoping he can join us for lunch. Would you like that, lovey?”

Her eyes were wide and trusting.

I nodded my head as moved Bree’s arm out of the strap. She whined unhappily as I struggled. “Yes, we are going to see Daddy. I’m hoping he can join us for lunch. Would you like that, lovey?”

Her headed nodded eagerly as her hair tumbled into her face. The barrette managed to stay in place and I sighed in relief. Isla wasn’t the most patient or easygoing child when it involved doing her hair. She screamed bloody murder every time I came near her with a brush. I wasn’t sure why, and she accused me of ‘urtin’ her. I thought she was a tad to melodramatic, but Jamie sympathized with her.

We made our way into the building, and Lucas in security waves us through. “Good afternoon Mrs. Fraser, I see you’ve brought your little girl, oh and is this the newest one?” He was friendly to me whenever I visited, and we talked on occasion about our children. He had a son a bit older than Isla. “What’s her name again?”

“Brianna, but we mostly just call her Bree.”
“Bee, Bee,” Isla squealed happily at the mention of her baby sister. She’d grown to care for her over the last month or two. “I luv Bee.” She informed the man.

He beamed down at her and patted her tiny head. “I’m sure you’re a good big sister.” She nodded enthusiastically. “Well you know where to go, I’m not sure if he’s in his cubicle or not, but he hasn’t left the building for his lunch break yet.” He winked at me.

I thanked him profusely before we made our way over to the elevator. Bree had a chunk of my hair in her mouth as she laid her down. She was in unfamiliar surroundings and desired comfort over anything else at this point.

Isla had been to work with Jamie a few times, and somewhat knew her way around. Sometimes she got herself lost, but could almost always be found at the desk of a secretary with a lollipop.

“Ma, you love da?”

I hummed, unsure of what she was actually asking me. “Love da, love Bee.” I frowned before it hit me.

“Yes, I love your daddy. I also love you and your sister so much.” She nodded her head affirmatively before facing forward again.

I wondered what went on in her little head. I imagined an amazing mind was under there, and once she had the communication skills to let it be known what she thought, the world would become hers.

The doors opened and she took off immediately in the direction of her daddy’s cubicle. Her chubby legs were quite fast, and I wasn’t able to keep up with her.

Bree was in my arms and hit me when I tried to chase after her sister. She didn’t appreciate the jerky movements of my running with her. When I caught up with Isla, she was frozen in place with a strange look on her face. “Love, what’s wrong?” I asked worriedly, kneeling to her level.

Her eyes were fixated on something in front of her and when I turned, I saw Jamie. The problem was he wasn’t exactly alone. The person who sat at the cubicle beside him was with him as well… with her hands all over him. I wanted to march over there to slap him and throttle her. It was reality slapping me in the face reminding how I could never have everything I truly wanted in life. It wasn’t possible.

Her hands were on his shoulders as she dug her thumbs into the tender flesh. His eyes were closed and his face expressed the bliss he felt at her touch. A moan escaped him as she hit a particularly sensitive spot. Her face was turned downwards toward him, and I saw the love in her eyes. She was devoted to him.

I wasn’t sure what I was feeling. It was some mixture of heartbreak, embarrassment, and all encompassing shame. Shame because my husband had a relationship with another woman, and it clearly meant something to him. While Jamie was a friendly person, he didn't allow just anyone to touch him.

Funny how the heart can be deceiving
More than just a couple times
Why do we fall in love so easy
Even when it's not right

Never once in our passionate and often times tempestuous relationship had I imagined him to be
someone unfaithful to his partner. We’d both talked about infidelity and our feelings on the matter, but I supposed opinions could change.

I turned away and snatched Isla into my arms as I carried both girls and we made our way to the exit. I felt like a damn fool for believing everything was okay between us. How could it be when I was carrying a child he’d shown absolute disdain for? My eyes watered, but I refused to let the tears to fall. He didn’t deserve anymore of my tears. I shed too many where he was concerned.

“Ma, who dat?” Isla finally asked me, her eyes unreadable.

She clearly sensed something wasn’t right with the woman. Children were good judges of character. She had never seen another woman draped over her father either aside from me. “That’s daddy’s work friend Britney,” I tried to keep the bite out of my tone, but I don’t think I managed it.

Isla was silent as we ate lunch and played with her food. I chose not to correct or scold her because of what she witnessed. “Da luv Bit?”

I sucked in a breath, nearly choking on the weight of it. I didn’t know what Jamie fancied himself doing, but honestly it would hurt probably a trillion times more if he was actually in love with her. An affair without emotions was different. When emotionally betraying your spouse, there was an unforgivable act committed. Would I want him if he had physically betrayed me? I wasn’t sure as to the answer of either. All I knew was that my heart couldn’t handle the crushing blow if he chose to leave. It was already in tattered pieces, what would it take for it to completely shatter and I was left feeling nothing?

It nagged at me. I had no idea about the newfound closeness between Jamie and his work colleague. How long had it been going on? Was it because of the baby? Did he feel trapped in this life he never asked for? He was simply expecting to live here a few years as I went to medical school. Now we had a family with another child, and he had to drop out of his degree program because he refused to rely on my trust fund. He thought of it as cheating and not his money, despite my argument that anything that was mine was his. He refused because he believed it to be his job to be the bread winner for our family. His father educated him about honor and responsibility, and to Jamie the two went hand in hand with one another.

“I don’t know Isla. Mummy needs time to think. Eat your food before it gets cold.”

Her sharp eyes narrowed, but she did as I asked. I was thankful for the moment to myself. The problem was could I trust him and myself to fully give him my heart again? I hadn’t lied when I said he had it, but I wasn’t entirely truthful either. I’d kept remnants of it because I refused to ever give someone my entire self again. I ended up spurned and completely lost to the emotional wreckage of heartbreak. It was a new experience for me, and not one I was keen to repeat ever again. I was devastated and crippled with the loss of something amazing. I knew I wouldn’t find the equivalent of that feeling in my life again. So I resolved myself to protect my heart from anyone who came to close.

He stared at me expectantly with his clear blue gaze. “Ugh I hate you know me so well,” I grumbled. I wanted a few more moments to compose my thoughts before I assaulted him with what went on inside of my head. I exhaled calmly through my teeth as I thought of my meditative breathing. “I guess I’m nervous.” I admitted to him with a tiny hint of fear lacing my voice. “I’ve been thinking about us and everything.”

The entire situation was weighing heavily on me. I was completely nervous about what to expect, not knowing how to navigate the tentative relationship we had at the moment because all that was
currently between us aside from two daughters was a night we spent over two months ago. I wasn’t sure what to think after he let me go, and didn’t try to chase after me as he would’ve done in the past. We kept letting each other go.

I was terrified as soon as I told him the news, he’d bolt and be back on the other side of the Atlantic before I could blink. It was unfair and I was certainly projecting, but as much as I knew him in the past, there were clearly aspects of him I wasn’t familiar with. I also didn’t fully know all the ways in which he’d changed over the years, nor was he aware of how I had as well. In some ways, we were strangers meeting on a train again.

Could I do it again?

*Where there is desire, there is gonna be a flame*
Where there is a flame, someone’s bound to get burned
But just because it burns, doesn’t mean you’re gonna die
You gotta get up and try, and try, and try
Gotta get up and try, and try, and try
You gotta get up and try, and try, and try

**JPOV**

She was jittery and flustered, and I wasn’t sure what to make of her unfamiliar behavior. Claire was many things, but insecure was rarely something I associated with her. She was one of the most confident people I knew with her bossiness and taking the helm of situations. Yet, there was something clearly off with her, and I couldn’t figure out what it was.

Her fingers twitched and tapped against the steering wheel, which was obviously a quirk she’d picked up over the years.

The car was blanketed in our silence, but neither of us seemed ready to pick the conversation up again, so we simply sat there as Claire navigated her way around the city like a complete native.

When we first moved here, we had to learn our way around together. It was unfamiliar to us, and it was strange becoming accustomed to the changing seasons and driving on the other side of the road. Or celebrating holidays like the Fourth of July or Thanksgiving. It was hard not to when friends constantly invited us to events.

We had only each other to rely on in those early months. It was fun deciding to get lost in the city together on weekends as we found restaurants, clubs, local grocery stores, and everything else in-between. Claire had spent nine more years living here than me, and probably knew the city about as well as London.

She appeared comfortable behind the wheel, which was not something she was used to when we first arrived. There was never a true need for driving in London with all the forms of public transportation the city offered.

“When did ye become so comfortable behind the wheel here?” I asked her out of curiosity. During our last months, she was still hesitant and overly cautious whenever driving, afraid she might hit something or someone.

At first it appeared as if she hadn’t heard my question, but I kent very well she had. Just as I opened my mouth to repeat, she answered. “Probably around the Christmas after you left. Road conditions during the winter aren’t always the best, and it can get quite icy. I had to learn how to not be so uptight whilst driving and to relax. I used to take a couple of deep breaths before driving, and then I would finally go.”
I listened as she told me about her many driving adventures. “I was in a bad wreck last summer with some serious injuries. It’s why my contact with the girls was so spotty. Every time I FaceTimed them, we had to cover up all the bruises and hide the fact I was in a hospital.”

Mel had told me as much back in Scotland, but it was different to hearing it from Claire herself. She was forthcoming and relayed all the details about it. “I still have some scars, but they’ve faded for the most part. I think most of them are trauma related. I went back to my therapist for a few sessions following the accident because I was terrified to get behind the wheel again. She told me to consider taking driving lessons with an instructor to build up my confidence. It helped immensely honestly.”

There was so much about her life that happened in my absence, and it worried me. How many opportunities would we get? Life was quick and could be brutal to the best of us. We’d dealt with premature birth, miscarriage/still birth, divorce, and so much more.

I knew in my heart I simply was unable to walk away from the woman beside me. If I did, I wouldn’t get another chance. I was more than aware of that.

We pulled in front of the same house I visited a few years ago. The house appeared much the same. There was a tiny flower garden set up in front of the house. The house was the same light brown color with the brown tiled roof.

The driveway was quite long with a small garage at the end. “I rarely ever use it unless it’s freezing outside.” Claire informed me with a soft smile. “It’s easier in the morning to just back out inside of having to remember to close it.

The house was quite large no matter how you looked at it. “How many bedrooms?” I asked her.

“There are four and three and a half bathrooms as well. Isla and Bree do not share one. Since they’re both older now as well, they’re each responsible for cleaning their own. The skylights are mostly what sold me on the house though.” I recalled them from my last visit. They certainly let in a lot of light.

We walked into the house where she set her purse on a table by the door. The house had changed some since I was last here. There were far more pictures of the girls on the walls, and some of them replaced the ones that were previously there.

They were in ornate silver frames and really highlight Claire’s classiness. She wasn’t generally into opulent possessions, but she believed in pictures having nice homes.

I stopped in front of the stairs to observe the new pictures. When I visited seven and a half years ago, it was a kindergarten Isla and pre-school aged Bree decorating the walls.

Instead of two children, one barely out of toddlerhood, it was two young girls well on their way to becoming young women. Isla beamed expertly for her sixth grade photo with her face angled just right. Her hair was perfectly coifed in curls with some sort of braid running down the side. I had the same photo at home, but it was still strange to see all the ways in which my little girl wasn’t so little anymore. Next to her was a third grade Bree. Her normally wild mane was styled into a braid with a ribbon tied at the bottom much like today. She was missing a tooth on the bottom. Her eyes seemed almost unnaturally large for her face, but were bright and happy.

There was a photo of the two of them in front of Cinderella’s castle. They had their ears on and Bree was trying to lick Isla’s face. “I put that one up to embarrass them more than anything. They’re such silly girls. I have a nicer one on my bedside table. The picture there is when Bree won her first football game after she joined a new team or soccer as she prefers.” She rolled her
eyes playfully. “Those are a few of her teammates. They’ve played together for about two or so years.”

She directed me to the opposite wall with a huge family portrait of the three of them. Claire sat on a chair with a girl on each arm of the chair. Isla wore her hair in loose waves, while Bree’s was in a ponytail. They all shared the same smile, and their teeth were on full display for the camera. Claire had an arm wrapped around both girls as if it were the most natural thing, which it probably was. In the next one, Isla was on her stomach with Bree on top of her. Their grins were wide and eyes sparkled merrily.

“They look a lot like you. I ken ye disagree, but when I see them I see your smile, or the little sparkle in yer eyes. They’re so much like ye, it’s sometimes incredible.” She ducked her head bashfully, although I caught sight of the flaming of her cheeks. “What’s this one?”

It was a picture of all three of them. They were at the beach. Bree’s two front teeth were missing, and Isla’s hair appeared recently cut. “Bree was almost five, which puts Isla at six nearly seven. Ages mattered significantly to them. We had spent two weeks on Martha’s Vineyard. It was our last day there and we were simply walking, and Mel well…” she rolled her pretty brown eyes once again. “She enjoys photography, her wife jokes about it being her second career. Anyways she caught us as we were playing in the waves.”

I saw the carefree expressions of joy on their faces as Bree was preparing to splash water at her sister, Claire was chasing after her, and Isla was trying to run from her sister. They belonged there in that moment. It was moment preserved and saved from the funny tricks of passing time. I almost felt as if I could reach right through and be in the moment with them. But it was one of theirs, not meant for me.

The pictures on the wall told their story after I left. As we made our way to her family room, I froze at the sight of a picture on the wall. I turned to her with tears clinging to my lashes searching for confirmation of what I was seeing. She nodded her head as she slid her hand into mine. “I didn’t want to pretend as if it never existed.”

In front of me was the only family portrait we had. Bree was perhaps no older than three months, Isla was newly two, and unbeknownst to us in Claire’s belly was Gabriel. Bree was held delicately in her mother’s arms, while Isla sat on my lap. I had an arm wrapped around Claire as we all smiled for the camera. “I remember it took ye feeding Bree for her to stop crying long enough to take the picture. We were both ready to tear our hair out. I had to bribe Isla with ice cream for her to sit still.”

Ever worry that it might be ruined  
And does it make you wanna cry  
When you’re out there doing what you’re doing  
Are you just getting by  
Tell me are you just getting by, by, by

Her head fell onto my shoulder, and I heard her sniffle. My eyebrow lifted of its’ own accord as I hesitated about what to do. “Are ye okay Sassenach?”

She nodded her head, but I wasn’t entirely convinced. “Let’s go eat. We have some leftovers from our back to school party last night.” I stared at her strangely. She shrugged helplessly with a tiny smile adorning her lips. “It’s a tradition we started a few years ago. It isn’t always hosted by us, but it was our turn this year. We have all their friends over, and there’s food, laughter, maybe a game of something. It’s a good way to send the kids back.”

She pulled out Tupperware from her fridge and began piling them onto her counter. “We’ve got
burgers, hot dogs, potato salad, pasta salad, baked beans, taco salad, uh… let’s see ribs, and barbecue chicken. We also have some sliced fruit as well.”

“Dhia, were ye feeding an army?”

She smiled wanly. “Close, a bunch of preteen girls who are going through all sorts of whatever. I’m constantly at the grocery because of how fast we go through food.”

We settled down with our plates at their dinner table. “The skylights let in a lot of light.” I commented recalling her comment from the car.

She swallowed before taking a sip of water. Her face transformed as she began talking about different features of the house. “My mum helped me find it. We’ve lived here for about eight years now. It’s a short commute to my work. My mother or one of the other parents in our carpool usually takes the girls to school. When they were younger, they went to daycare after school until they picked up sports. I remember when I first showed Isla the house, she stared at it as if it were some kind of mansion. I suppose after living in a two bedroom apartment up until that point it probably was. She looked at it then at me and asked ‘is this our house?’ I told her yes and she began running through the halls screaming excitedly. Bree was nearly two at this point and did whatever her sister did.”

I chuckled at the picture she painted. “I guess it was love at first sight.”

The light illuminated Claire’s skin providing a nice glow. Although some of it seemed to radiate from her being, and she was truly a picture. Her dark hair was shiny and hung down her back. Her porcelain face was relaxed, her freckles hidden just beneath the light make-up she wore. There was something tremendously beautiful about her, and I couldn’t tell if it was her inner or outer beauty.

“If you want, you are welcome to pick the girls up from school. Bree’s school gets out at half past two, and Isla’s ends at three. Bree doesn’t have football today, but Isla has practice. You could watch field hockey team. She might be embarrassed.” Claire’s were moving quickly, and I sensed her anxiety skyrocket yet again.

Whatever news she had to tell me wasn’t helping her nerves settle. “I ken yer nervous about something, so tell me what it is. I dinna like to see ye worked up,” my hand covered hers and I squeezed gently reminding her I was here.

She took a few deep, calming breaths, but it didn’t help her. Her hand was shaking under mine and I caught her glassy orbs. “Please Mo Nighean Donn,” her head snapped up as the term of endearment slipped past my lips.

Her mouth uncharacteristically fell open as she simply stared at me for a few lingering seconds. “Y-you haven’t called me that since…” she glanced skyward as she tried to think about it. I had stopped calling her that long before we made the decision to end our marriage. We were always unhappy, and it seemed as if everything I called her in the past wasn’t her anymore. “Well I don’t know;” she murmured quietly.

I pushed back in my chair and came to kneel by her side. I cupped her face in both of my hands, and she leaned into my touch. “Sorcha, I dinna care what it is ye have to say to me. I am here for however long you want me, whether that is ten minutes or forever.”

Tears traveled down her face as she listened intently to my words. “I made a mistake in the past when I allowed us to give up so easily what we worked on for years. I’m made of stronger stuff, and I’ve spent time figuring out myself to ken I canna leave ye. Even if ye send me away again,
I’ll still be here. I need ye like the air I breathe. I want to cross the river.”

She steeled herself before saying the words that changed everything.

“I’m pregnant.”

*You gotta get up and try, and try, and try
Gotta get up and try, and try, and try*

-Try, Pink
Stay

Chapter Summary

Jamie and Claire talk. We get to see more of Bree and Isla.

Chapter Notes

Hello you lovely, amazing people, although I guess it's morning. It's 2:30 a.m and I've been feverishly typing away for the last two hours. Somehow it's turned into over 8000 words and don't ask me how because two hours ago I was at 3500. The chapter is entirely in Jamie's POV, which kind of shocks me and I'm the author.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All along it was a fever
A cold sweat hot-headed believer
I threw my hands in the air, said, "Show me something"
He said, "If you dare, come a little closer"

JPOV

I stared at her in complete shock, overwhelmed by the news she dropped on me. If there was anything I was expecting, it certainly wasn’t for her to tell me she was pregnant.

Her face was tense with her fists clenched in her lap and her eyes squeezed tightly as if in preparation for a negative reaction from me.

Wetness coated her face as I tried to gather myself and my thoughts, completely unaware that I’d probably done the worst thing. I was baffled how it could’ve happened, but she and the bairn were my responsibility.

I stroked her face, brushing away stray tears and kissing any new ones away. I felt her sigh against my lips before burrowing her head in my chest. “Dinna fash Claire, this is wonderful news. While I am surprised, I couldna be happier.”

Her head quickly reared back, knocking into my jaw as shock claimed her face. “You’re not angry? Or a little upset? It wasn’t planned. We weren’t even supposed to see each other again.” Her eyes lowered to her lap. “I wouldn’t blame you if you were.” Her tone was barely decipherable and I heard the tears she choked back.

With a profound certainty, I didn’t know I possessed I assured her of my devotion to her. “Sassenach, there’s nothing in the world that will force me from yer side again. Even if ye never want me the way ye did, I’ll still be there to support ye through everything including raising our girls and this new child.” Her eyes softened and the tears halted the trip down her face.

I needed to redeem myself in her eyes after I behaved less than admirable the last time she told me. I saw the brokenness in her, the utter heartbreak and loss she hid from the rest of the world. I saw
all the pieces that were left, and the patch job she did to make herself as whole as she could be. I knew the feeling.

Her hand cupped my face as she tenderly ran her fingers across the planes of my face. “I was nervous to tell you,” she admitted, her face burned with apparent shame.

“Well I canna say I blame ye after what happened last time. I want ye to ken I’ve never regretted a single pregnancy of yours. Gabriel was perhaps the most unexpected of all of our bundled joys, and we never properly celebrated the news together.” I’m not sure who reached first, but we were in one another’s embrace again. I smelled the vanilla of her shampoo and felt the downy softness of her hair against my cheek. I was home in her arms.

I shed a few tears into her hair and felt the shuddering force of her sobs at the mention of our child. After visiting his grave, I couldn’t ignore the feelings inside of me that screamed for him. I hadn’t told Claire then, but I struggled with my own faith in the aftermath of our son’s death. I wondered endlessly if it counted as death if he’d never lived. He hadn’t taken a single breath, instead he was a small baby, no longer a fetus, but he was something otherworldly altogether.

Gabriel reminded me of the tales my mam told my siblings and I when we were young. She tucked us in with our eyes wide and full of wonder as she regaled us with stories of mythical creatures including fairies who stole away with human children and replaced them with their own.

As I cradled his body to my chest, Gabriel reminded me of a child belonging to another realm. His tiny, almost un-human like features would remain so forever.

“What if it happens again?” Her voice was small and fearful, traits I normally wouldn’t associate with someone as bold and brave as her. She was always the strong one, despite what she believed and kept us afloat when we struggled. “I don’t think I could bear to lose another one Jamie.” I pictured her face as her features crumbled into dismay and the heartbreak that would shine in her eyes.

I ran my fingers through her long locks and hummed an old lullaby. “Shh… ye dinna need to worry. We’ll go to yer doctor as soon as possible to get ye checked out. I will do everything I can to make sure the baby stays healthy and inside of ye.” I kissed her hair and felt her snuggle into me.

A few months ago, I couldn’t have imagined this as being our future. I didn’t think I’d see her again until Isla graduated or we were forced to cross paths. We’d drawn our lines and destroyed any bridges in our path with lighter fluid and matches. We stood on our respective sides of the river and watched as years of love burned around us.

Round and around and around and around we go
Oh now, tell me now, tell me now you know

Claire shifted against me, and I allowed her space when I realized she was merely checking her phone. “Oh shite,” she grumbled unhappily, her body pushed away from mine as she stood up.

Her hand reached out for the table as she tried to steady her balance. Her equilibrium wasn’t quite there, and I knew she was experiencing a case of dizziness. She had during all of her pregnancies. I rushed over to the cabinet in search of a glass and brought her some water to sip as she regained her balance.

I knew the coldness of the water was soothing for her. She smiled gratefully. I decided to clean up lunch, knowing she didn’t need the extra movement so soon after one of her spells as she called them.
She attempted to protest, and I honestly wasn’t surprised. “Jamie, I’m perfectly cap-“

I cut her off immediately, unwilling to hear the rest of speech about independent she was. I’d heard enough of it in the past that I could tell her it word for word. “I ken full well yer capable, but Claire it’s the least I can do. Ye wouldn’t have even been here if not for me, so I can help with some dishes.” I fixed her with a stern look, and her words died before leaving her lips.

She sat back down at the table and watched as I cleared lunch. I caught the slightest twitching of her lips, and I wasn’t offended in the slightest. I kent very well what she thought was hilarious and I chose to ignore her with a fond roll of my eyes.

I hadn’t been one for assisting in the kitchen when we were married. It wasn’t I believed a woman’s place was in the kitchen, but I was normally a clumsy clot and broke more than a few of our nice dishes.

Claire’s eyes blazed angrily when I broke some of our wedding china. We hadn’t been using it, but she’d been gingerly cleaning them because according to her they were collecting dust. I tripped into her, the dish went flying out of her hands, and then crashed into the kitchen floor. The ferocity of her anger caused me to fear for my manhood, and I swore to stay out of her way in the kitchen after that incident.

After I rinsed off our plates and stored them in the dishwasher and returned the remaining leftovers to the fridge, I offered my arm to her and assisted her.

Her lips were pinched tightly together, which meant she was biting back a sharp retort. I appreciated the gesture as I understood she was trying her best not to let her temper get the best of her. She was making the effort for me.

I brought her hand to my lips to show her my appreciation. “Let’s get ye back to work. Are ye okay to drive?”

“Yes,” she nodded as she locked up the house and set the alarm. I hadn’t noticed when we arrived her disarming it. I quirked a curious brow. “Oh, well Isla was getting a lift from my mum, and sometimes she forgets to set the alarm when she leaves. I’ll talk to her about it when I see her tonight.”

The drive back to the hospital held none of the tension the drive to her house did. It was almost peaceful aside from Claire seeming to hit about every single red light as she’d decided to forgo the interstate to show me the area she’d made home. It wasn’t too far from where we previously resided, but in a city like Boston, a thirty minute drive made all the difference in your location.

“What made ye choose to live in Cambridge?” We hadn’t exactly decided on a location when we were planning to move out of our crowded apartment.

Her eyes found mine before returning to the road. I saw the spark of life in those whiskey colored orbs. “Well it was really my realtor. I wanted something not too far from the hospital. I didn’t care about school districts as I knew then the girls would attend Catholic schools. The house was probably our second or third showing, and it was perfect. As I said, I knew from the beginning. Besides saying Cambridge sort of reminds me of home on occasion.” I saw the whites of her teeth as she beamed at me.

“So aside from the sky lights, is there any another part of the house ye like?”

I simply wanted to hear her talk. I didn’t particularly care about the subject matter. It was being in close proximity and hearing her voice in person and not through a grainy speaker.
“The bathrooms are quite nice, but I suppose my favorite room is the sitting room. The window seat overlooks the garden, and it’s lovely during fall. I curl up with a book and usually have a nap. There’s always a blanket nearby as the girls do the same themselves. It’s comfy and cozy, and perfect for lazy days where we don’t go anywhere and sit at home.”

The image filled my heart with love as I saw it. Claire always enjoyed days where she could relax. She was a workaholic and was restless if she was without a purpose for too long, but if she had a day off, she would simply lay there with a book or sleep all day. Occasionally she watched movies. She would stay in her pajamas, usually plaid bottoms and a t-shirt she nicked from me. Her hair was stuck in a bun on top of her head. Casual Claire had to be one of my favorite versions of her. It was the her no one else really saw, and was reserved for her family. The one she often neglected in favor of making sure everyone else’s needs were met instead of her own.

Her fingers were loose on the wheel and her shoulders were down compared to her stiff manner at the beginning of our journey. It occurred to me how truly worried she was about my rejection of her and our newest child.

“Claire,” she hummed in response as she kept her eyes on the road. “So ye said Bree was almost five in the picture of the three of ye at the beach, how did she come to lose her two front teeth at age four?” All I would ever have is the stories of what happened in my absence, but I still wanted to know.

Her eyes crinkled in obvious mirth as a snort escaped her. She began chortling and I was worried about her sanity. “Sorry,” she apologized as she attempted to control her laughter. “It’s really not funny, but at the same time it is. Bree was already playing football by that time. Well she was quite angry at me one day, and went out into the garden to play. One of her angry kicks resulted in the ball hitting the pole of the net and then smacking her right in the face. It knocked out both teeth. She had a lisp until they grew in, and it reminded me quite a bit of Sylvester.”

“Was she perfectly okay? No other injuries?” I was worried about an incident that occurred five years ago. With each passing tale, I ached for the lost time together.

Claire shook her head. “No, she cried, but it was more from shock than being hurt. You should’ve seen her. She was tiny back then and quite fierce with an independent streak a mile long.” I couldn’t fathom where she would’ve gotten that. Claire ignored my look. “She had this pissed off expression and her eyes were narrow slits, her lips pinched tightly together, and she threw a tantrum as she stormed through the house. I ignored it that day as my mum said giving her attention was exactly what she wanted.”

It wasn’t hard to imagine because I knew quite well from experience where Bree inherited that particular expression. I had seen it dozens if not hundreds of times on her mother’s face.

“What?” Claire asked.

“Nothing.”

“Liar, you’re smirking over there and I want to know why.”

I cackled as soon as she made the same expression as the one she just described. “Jamie, you’re such an arse.”

I couldn’t stop laughing because it felt good. I felt so much lighter than I had in ages. It was a relief not to have a weight constantly pressing down on me. These last few weeks I was a wound up ball of anxiety and confusion. I debated heavily on whether or not to begin the application process for permanent residence and to start searching for jobs.
I had a few former work colleagues I still kept in contact with, inquire about possible openings at businesses around the city. One of them helped me to make a connection with a private investment firm, and we had an initial phone interview before an official one over Skype.

They were quite impressed with my education and intuitive nature. When I returned to Scotland, before I started my business, I decided to finish the rest of my degree at the University of Edinburgh. I needed the distraction of something in my life, and school filled me with a purpose in the absence of my life.

It definitely helped procuring the extra degree when I began my application. The first time round I only filled out a student visa, which I then had to file another when I dropped out and began working.

At the moment, I had a visa that allowed me to work and live in the United States until they approved my application for a green card. It could take anywhere from seven to thirteen months depending on what number my paperwork was in the admission process.

“Why did ye apply for citizenship?” I knew it was a non-sequitur, but I remember when the girls first told me about their mam being like them.

It niggled at me greatly, but we weren’t on such great speaking terms at the time. There was no way I could’ve asked her such a thing.

The lines around her eyes appeared as she wondered what my purpose was for asking in the first place. While there were differences in Claire from when I had truly known her, her facial expressions never changed and almost always gave away her thoughts. If she wore a mask, her eyes were the best way to tell the sort of mood she was in or what was going through her mind.

Not really sure how to feel about it
Something in the way you move
Makes me feel like I can’t live without you
It takes me all the way
I want you to stay

Her tongue darted out to wet her luscious, pink lips. I followed the movement with my eyes tempted to kiss her, knowing I would have to wait until we were parked if I wanted to make such a bold move. “Well it was easier honestly. I applied for a green card before you left actually and was on a visa until I got it. I think they approved me around the beginning of 2011, and I completed the requirements of a permanent resident. I hadn’t left the U.S. during that time as I was fairly busy with the girls and my residency, and it was just easy to stay.”

“What sorts of things were required for citizenship?” I’d heard about the difficulty in becoming a citizen, but if anyone were up to the challenge, it was Claire.

“You have to possess knowledge about the constitution, civics, pretty good understanding of the English language,” her lips twitched. “And have good moral character. It’s an interview process, not terrifying in the least. I actually filled out the forms three months prior to completing my residency requirement because it gave me a jump start, especially as I was ending my surgical residency.”

Claire was nothing if not efficient. She never had time for chaos in her life, and preferred to have her tasks completed early so that she didn’t run the risk of forgetting about it in the end.

Our time together was almost over as I recognized the area. The hospital was a few blocks away.

“Why become an American though?”
“Because our daughters were citizens and I knew I wouldn’t ever go back to England.” At least she was honest about her intentions. I couldn’t fault her for her answer because I’d asked her, and expected it in all fairness. “I love my homeland, although I’m still disappointed about the World Cup, but I’ve now lived here for twelve years, and England sometimes seems more like a fantasy than anything tangent if that makes any semblance of sense to you.”

I nodded because it did. It was how I thought about her after I moved back to Scotland. Our time together almost felt like a novel, something not real. I often felt as if I’d imagined the whole thing, but I wasn’t nearly that creative. The longer you’re parted from something, the less real it feels.

We pulled into the car park. “Thank ye for lunch,” I couldn’t look at her because I knew I would ask her to not go back in and stay with me for the afternoon. I couldn’t ask that of her, not yet. I wanted her to understand I took us seriously. I couldn’t ask her to skive off the remainder of her day.

“If I had known you were coming, I would’ve come down with a case of the flu. Wouldn’t have been so out there considering how miserable I’ve been from the morning sickness. Mine tends to come in the afternoon, and let me tell you, it has nearly ruined several of my surgeries. The baby doesn’t like the sterile smell,” a smile began to take form on my face as she talked about our baby. “I’ve got about ten minutes, but I should be looking over patient files. I don’t have any surgeries currently for today, but sometimes an emergency does come in.”

It's not much of a life you're living
It's not just something you take it's given

I understood what she was trying to tell me without her needing to voice it. There was a chance she might work later than she expected. “You can pick up the girls. Isla still has no clue about you being here, and she’ll be over the moon. She does have practice today and Bree has practice at four. Bree gets picked up from school through a carpool, but I can text her friend’s mum and tell her not to worry. Before I forget,” she unlocked her car to retrieve a piece of cardstock. “It’s so Bree and the school know someone is picking her up. Anyways, her coach texted earlier when you were using the bathroom that they were going to have a last minute practice as she’s cancelling Thursday’s. Isla will stay after school for practice which ends at five thirty. You can pick her up then or eee her practice, and I’ll text my mum and tell her the ride is all taken care of. Isla finishes at one, but she will just stay after.”

I marveled at the woman before me as she had parenting down to a science. She was constantly aware of our daughters and their active schedules, and found ways to stay involved with their lives.

“Don’t let them con you into a pizza. It’s leftover night, and they’re perfectly aware we’ve still got food at the house. Both girls have a house key, and you can stay until I get home.”

“It’ll be fine Claire. I’ve taken care of them before this.” They did stay with me two months every summer. “I haven’t poisoned them yet.”

Her brows nearly rose to her hairline, and I was surprised to find they could go higher. At least that was my perception. “They’re talented at getting their way, and they’ll have you believing I never cook for them and we eat take-out regularly. I’m just saying watch out because Isla has all the numbers on speed dial.” She winked at me as we shared a brief, intimate hug.

It was far too short for me to fully enjoy her body pressed against mine. The moment was imprinted in my mind, and I hadn’t been so happy in ages. We were together in the same place without the possibility of one of us leaving the other behind. I inhaled her familiar scent and tried to keep the memory until I saw her again. "I'll never leave ye again Sassenach."
I was willing to do anything to make us work because neither of us were quite ourselves when we weren’t together. Something inside me was complete when she was around, and I needed that in life.

Life existed around me when she wasn’t there to brighten my world.

"I love you James Fraser, and I don't know what I did to deserve you once let alone twice, but I'll spend the rest of my days with you because you're it." Her eyes drew me in like a moth to a flame.

I almost kissed her, but I decided not to as it was her place of work and there was a possibility anyone could see us. Claire loved to maintain her professionalism.

“I’ll call when I’m on my way.” Her lips came awfully close to mine, but she diverted at the last minute and kissed the side of my mouth before scurrying away in a haze of uncertainty. Our new relationship needed some discussions, but they were better left for when she actually had time.

Round and around and around and around we go
Oh now, tell me now, tell me now, tell me now you know

I had a lot on my mind as I walked back to my car. There was now another child in the picture relying on Claire and I for lack of a better word to have our shit together. We gave up easily in the past because we lacked the skills to communicate and empathize with the other’s feelings. We were young and sometimes it felt like we were playing at being adults.

We’d gotten married when we were twenty years old. It wasn’t a wrong decision, but if I reflected on the time, we weren’t ready for the responsibilities. We simply wanted to be tied to one another permanently without conscious thoughts about how it fully affected our future and what sacrifices each of us might have to make. We hadn’t thought of the possibility of having children while Claire was still in medical school; it was always a thought for later and when Claire’s period skipped, we freaked out.

It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility as we tried to be careful with birth control, but sometimes we couldn’t keep our hands off one another to grab a condom.

I didn’t regret my children. Each one was a blessing given to us by god, and I cherished my daughters for the joy, love, light, and just everything else they brought to my life simply by existing.

I had some time to spare before school ended and decided to check out the apartment where I would be living. Claire and I needed to work on our relationship issues and figure out the people we were and how that fitted with one another.

We couldn’t jump back into anything because there was more to consider than us. We would move back in together when the timing was right for all of us. I needed all of my girls to be secure I wouldn’t jump across the Atlantic again if things got too difficult. I was here for the duration and nothing could force me away again.

Isla and I discussed some of this when it was her and I in her hospital room. She told me how there was a time she hated me. When she realized how far Scotland was from Boston, and how I never attended any of her school programs, sports games, and everything else that made up her life. She played piano and the violin, which I didn’t know about. Occasionally there was a recital for parents to attend and see the progress of their children, and Isla had two a year for the last six years.
At first she couldn’t figure out what she was feeling when she saw other dads congratulate their kids or give their daughters flowers, and then with a sinking feeling in her stomach she realized she was envious. Other kids had something she only had for two months out of the year barring years they spent Nollaigand Hogmanay. It rarely happened as it was such a short time for the girls out of school. It was also one of the busiest times of year for me with the brewery and pub.

Isla was tearful as she informed how every time they traveled home, she found more reasons to hate me and wrote them down so she could stay angry. It made her feel better to hold onto because without it, inside she was empty. It all disappeared when she saw me again, but as soon as she was on the plane back home, the feelings of abandonment came back to her.

Her lifelong hope was the rekindling of my relationship with her mother. She never thought it would actually happen because the two of us never spoke unless it concerned our daughters. She picked up at a young age the tension between us. It never escaped her notice how I clenched my jaw or how Claire needed a glass of wine before she rang me. If Claire was particularly anxious, she would twirl the glass and balance on one leg to give herself something to focus on aside from her nerves.

Isla’s Hospital Room

Her eyes were such a dark blue. The shade was one I couldn’t figure out, but I saw the truth in her orbs. There was a pain she denied herself the right to express. She would blink, her long eyelashes affecting my view, and they seemed to revert to something expressionless.

Grey occasionally swept in at the edges creating a stormy effect against the blankness of her face. Her eyes were like her mother’s and told the story of her heart. Sometimes I felt as if I were thrust right into the midst of a raging hurricane when I stared too long. The colors swirled beautifully. They were different from her sister’s; Bree’s eyes were lighter and often reminded me of the sea or the ocean.

“Dad, the accident has put things in perspective for me.” Her eyes were on a fraying thread of her blanket.

Her pupils were dilated and darkness was creeping into her blue masterpieces. “I spent a lot of time hating you because you simply weren’t there. Sure if I called you answered, but there were times when I couldn’t.” She was such a serious child, and I thought maybe she’d always been thoughtful, conscientious, and inquisitive. “I saw what the other kids had and it made me mad.”

Her eyes glistened as her tone became softer, sadder, and possessed a tinge of desperation. “All I wanted was my daddy. My friends talked about how their dads scared away the monsters. I remember when you had done that for me.” The corner of her lips almost moved to form a smile, but it died before it could start. “Then there was the first daddy/daughter dance, and I skipped it. I had no dad to take, and it seemed silly to ask you to fly across the world for something as dumb as a dance.”

I heard the solemnness and saw it written into panes of her face. It seeped from her and filled the room with dark clouds. “I’m sorry I wasna there for ye. I wish more than anything I could’ve escorted ye.”

She wiped her forehead, brushing aside loose strands of dark red hair. Hints of gold peeked out at the edges. “I don’t need you say it now. I wanted it then when it would’ve made a difference. I did so many different things back then from community theater to dance. I had my first piano recital at four, and I wanted you there to show off how well I could play. I flubbed a note and cried right there for everyone to see.” Her eyes glazed over as she traveled back to that day. “It was the first time I was keenly aware that I didn’t have a dad, at least not like everyone else.”
I couldn’t describe the emotions raging inside of me as she told me about all the times she wished I was there. There were so many battling for attention. I wanted to say so many things when I realized it wasn’t about me. It was about her. She was a little girl mixed up in the drama and aftermath of our marriage. She never asked for the complications that went with a father living across the pond.

“Mom coached my first T-ball team.” She cracked her first smile. “She barely knew anything about baseball, but she did all this research so that she could effectively coach our team to the best of her ability. She purposely traded shifts for some really crappy ones just so she could coach my team.” Her sniffled brought my focus back to her face. “None of the other teams had moms coaching them, but mine did. I realized I had a dad when you weren’t there. It was my mom.” It gutted me and I wanted to claw out my traitorous heart for feeling betrayed by her frank words. “She coached our team to a championship as surprisingly as it sounds. We were just a bunch of six, seven, and eight year olds.”

Her eyes peeked at me from the fringe of her satin black lashes. They were a shield protecting her from anything that had the potential to hurt.

“I’m not as angry as I was then,” she admitted, her fingers picked at the thread. “I’ve learned to accept it’s something I simply can’t change. I spent so long being mad that I often cheated myself out of things. My friend Makayla’s dad invited me along with them to the father/daughter dance every year. Makayla and I have been attached at the hip since pre-school, and as a result I was close to her family. I could’ve gone but I stuck my nose up. Mr. Miller isn’t my dad, but he’s like one to me and he was being nice.”

She was distressed, and I saw her BP rising on the monitor. I was slightly worried about her. “Relax Isla,” I inhaled sharply as I prepared to lay out the truth for her. She was almost twelve years old, and deserved to know every bit I could tell her. “Ye’ve never done anything wrong, and yer right ye cheated yerself because ye waited for a man who was too cowardly to make the journey. Ye deserved better than me. I’ve loved ye since I first heard yer heart beat, but it was the moment I held ye for the first time and I kent I would love you forever. I wish ye had been more forthcoming over the years about what was happening in yer head and heart, but I suppose sometimes it felt like I was a complete stranger?” I posed it as a question because I was floating around, trying to understand her. I wonder if Claire ever felt as if she were in murky water as she tried to dive deep into their minds.

It was strange to think of Isla as a fully developed person. She had all these thoughts and feelings, and she was able to express them. Much of who she became was because of her mother’s influence.

“Yes, I guess that’s the right wording. It’s easier to talk to mom about stuff because well…” she hesitated with an uneasy glance thrown in my direction. “She knows me better.” She seemed to shrink with the revelation her words brought.

I slid my hand over hers and relished in the warmth. It was a different feeling than the one Claire’s gave me. “I dinna blame ye on that count, especially as yer becoming a young woman.” Her cheeks darkened to a ruddy color at my mention of her transition from one phase of life to the next. “I wish we had done things differently because there are so many things I can’t get back. I didn’t witness yer first lost tooth, or yer first day of school. I can hear stories about it for the rest of yer life but I can’t go back and get those moments back. I dinna ken how ye got that scar on yer leg. I should’ve made more of an effort to involve myself in yours and Bree’s lives. I could’ve arranged to fly over a couple of times a year to visit ye in yer home.” She opened her mouth to interject, but I held up my hand to stop her. “Edinburgh is a second home, but yer first home is always Boston.”
Her shoulders drooped as she sunk into the bed. She couldn’t deny when she thought about home, it wasn’t the cozy house I picked out for us. It was the place she spent the majority of the year, and the friends she’d made in her journey of life so far. “I feel awful dad.”

I placed a hand on her warm cheek. She was running a bit of a fever from a slight infection she caught after her surgery. “I think I needed to hear it. Bree is such a sunny and cheerful child, and I wouldn’a want her to feel like this ever.”

“You know she’s not always so sunny. Sometimes she can be downright horrible. We try to be on our best behavior because the time with you is so short. We don’t want to waste it being angry with one another, but in Boston we fight all the time like cats and dogs.”

A smirk appeared on my lips as it turned out Claire was right. They tried hard for me. “So I can expect next summer for ye to be two raging bulls?”

A sound that reminded me of bell chimes fell from her lips as she began to laugh. “You should ask mom some stories about us. She likes to fabricate things and make it sound worse than it actually is. Only one window ever got broken and it was a vase she didn’t like that fell.”

“I love you so much Isla Faith Fraser. I dinna want ye to ever forget how much ye mean to me and how lost I would be without ye in my life.”

I noticed how she ached to hug me, but she was still experiencing some physical pain. I closed the distance between us and wrapped her up, not too tightly, in my arms.

The hours passed and before I knew it I was picking up Bree from school. A huge grin was in place as she waited on the curb for pick up. She chattered to her little friends and her face was animated as her hands moved wildly. She was quite enthusiastic in her movements.

Claire had given me the numbered placard for pick-up as that was how they determined which child’s turn it was to leave. Bree must’ve heard her name as she began hugging her little friends before making her way to the car when she spotted me. She slid into the backseat with ease.

Her dress was tiny bit wrinkled, but none the worse for wear. She sported her hair in a French braid instead of the ponytail it was styled in earlier that morning. The ribbon was tied to the end, and her hairband was nowhere to be seen.

Her backpack was far emptier than it was when we walked her inside. “How was yer first day?”

It was clearly the right question as her face lit up and she began to rapidly talk. I knew she liked to talk, but I don’t think I’d ever heard so many words come out of her before.

“Oh Mrs. Nicholson is so awesome and nice. She let us pick our own desks, and told us she’d only move us if she found our seating arrangements to be a problem. I’m sitting with my friends and I’m so excited. Last year we sat at different islands because our teacher kept moving us all around the classroom. She wanted us to get to know all the kids in class and have a chance to work with them. Hopefully we don’t get moved.” She inhaled quickly before continuing on with her day. “Then we were assigned our cubbies. It’s alphabetical,” she explained. “So I was at the beginning since our last name starts with F. Then we put our supplies in little baskets at the bottom of our cubbies. Only our pencil boxes went in our desks as Mrs. Nicholson hates clutter.” She emphasized her statement with a hand gesture. “We didn’t really do much today except some back to school worksheets. There was this cool emoji activity we did where we cut out emojis and placed them on a sheet that looked like a tablet to show how we felt about different things like the first day and last day, or math, lunch. Then we filled out an all about ourselves sheet. We also read letters from last year’s fourth graders. We will write our own at the end of the year. Isn’t that
“exciting?”

There was so much exuberance exuding from her, I was almost worried I had the wrong child in the car.

“That is cool. Ye should definitely think over the school year what kind of advice you want to pass onto a kid next year.” Her head bobbed seriously as her eyes frosted over with consideration. “So it turns out ye have practice tonight for football. Yer mother received a text about a cancelled one later this week.”

“I’m so excited. We haven’t had a practice since Thursday because of a Labor Day Tournament. The coaches care more about our physical improvement than if we win. The tournament went okay, but there’s always room for improvement. I’m excited to beat my personal best this year and to work even harder than last year.” I saw the determined gleam in her eyes.

We played over the summers, but it was always more fun on my side. I never knew how seriously she took the sport, but if her face was any indication, it meant a lot to her. “We have a game this Saturday. Do you…” her voice trailed off and I glanced in the rearview mirror to catch her eyes.

“Do I… what?”

“Well parents are welcome to attend games. Sometimes with mommy too busy I ride with my friends, but if you aren’t well I wouldn’t mind if you came.”

I wracked my brains, but I wasn’t starting at my job for two weeks. I still had yet to reconnect with my friends from the city, so my schedule was wide open for whatever my girls wanted to do.

“Where is it?”

“I can’t remember exactly, but coach will probably tell us at practice. We play in the NEP/NEC league.” I crinkled my brow in confusion at what seemed to be a colloquial term. “It’s the New England Premiership and New England Championship,” she simplified. “We play more games in the fall as spring prepares us for the championship. We just had a tournament over Labor Weekend. It’s usually only holiday weekends we have tournaments.”

“When did ye try out?” I wasn’t sure when they held tryouts, and sometimes I worried if them visiting me affect the opportunities they had waiting for them back home.

She worried her bottom lip as she tried to recall. “It was the beginning of June, I think the fifth and sixth. They have us tryout based on when we were born because that determines our team. Our season starts in August and we train about twice a week. During the winter, we move our practices indoors and I play on a futsal team as well since our practices are only weekly. Then in March, we increase practices for NEP and NEC.”

I was astounded by how informative she was and how well she knew her stuff. She was still a nine year old underneath it all, and it amazed me that she was devoted.

“What’s yer favorite position?”

It took a while to ponder this as we made our way to her house. “Well I really enjoy being a striker because I love making goals. Defensive midfielder is probably my other favorite. We switch positions so we don’t get too comfortable and have an opportunity to play each position. I hate being goalie.” She bemoaned and told me about the injustice of standing in a net and waiting to catch the ball. “I like being in the action.”

I pulled into the driveway, and it was kind of strange but in a good way. Bree grabbed her backpack. I turned off the GPS on my phone and followed behind her.
She unlocked the door and disarmed the alarm. Her bag was plopped right by the door as she went to the fridge to get a snack. She pulled out apple slices and went to the pantry for peanut butter. Then took a seat the table and got back up for a glass of milk. She was self-sufficient and clearly knew her routines when she got home from school.

“Isla’s practice doesn’t start until three thirty. So we don’t have to leave yet. Do you want one?”

I sat down across from her and simply marveled at this marvelous creature. It seemed incredible how she was once a defenseless baby with tufts of bright orange hair and grew into this child who could certainly talk the ear off anyone.

I snatched an apple slice from her plate and she giggled. “Did anyone ever tell you, you talk to much?”

Her laugh was a tinkling sound. “All the time, my mom says I need duct tape all the time. Isla offers to use her own if I can’t shut up.” She shrugged her shoulders as if it was just her life. Which I guess it was. “You will have to drop me off at practice, or I can call my friend’s parents ask if they can pick me up from Isla’s school. Her practice doesn’t usually end until five thirty.” She chomped on another apple.

I studied her. She was more freckly than when I last saw her, and her arms had a bit of a tan. Both girls were just so fair. They had no chance. Her hair was streaked with lighter strands, more than likely a result from playing in the sun. “So how far is the field?”

“It’s like twenty minutes from here and Isla’s school. Either way you take I-90 or I-93. The field is by Pleasure Bay, so it can be cool sometimes. Mommy takes the longer route because she hates paying tolls, but if we are running late on the days she does carpool, she does go through them.”

She polished off her apple slices, and we still had some time before we had to leave. “You know Isla actually started school yesterday but it was only a half day. They got out at noon. Today was when classes started and sports practices.”

Bree was a fountain of information and honestly talked as long as you allowed her. “Come see my room,” she tugged me behind her as we made our way to the steps.

Her room was the second door at the top. The floor was made out of beautiful wood. They kept the floor polished which gave the wood a shiny appearance.

On Bree’s door there were little things to indicate it was hers. Her name was stenciled in calligraphy with multicolored paper flowers placed from top to bottom. It screamed Bree.

She opened the door to her room. The room was painted a soft pink with matching pink curtains adorning her windows. The curtains were open and let in light to further brighten the space. On the walls, were stick on gold polka-dots. She had a little pink chair in a corner where I imagined her curling up to read. A string of fairy lights were placed on the wall above her bed with pictures clipped of family and friends. The bed was a white wood four poster queen. She had a pink bed skirt, and I only imagined the things she kept under her bed. The blanket was actually white, interfering with her pink theme. She had two green decorative pillows with a pink one between them. Behind were two regular pillows in white pillow cases. Across from her bed was a white five drawer dresser some pattern painted on in teal. She had a white rug with a teal pattern.

The room was actually tidy. She had two dolls placed on her bed with a familiar, well worn Teddy in between. “The rest of them are in the play room. Mommy won’t let me keep my toys in here. She doesn’t like when my room isn’t clean.”
Ah... that made sense. Bree had difficulty picking up after herself at my house as well, and I constantly reminded her to clear her things when she was done with them. “Did you decorate?”

“Oh, it was a birthday present last year. I wanted something that wasn’t baby-ish.” She made a face. “My walls used to be lavender and I had a twin bed. There were butterflies and other little kid things.”

I coughed to hide my laughter because she was speaking as if she was teenager. “I like it.”

She straightened her back and her dimples popped out of her cheeks. She was pleased by my compliment. “Thanks,” then she turned from me and headed for her closet. She dug around until she pulled out a black backpack.

Cleats were thrown in the bag along with a hairbrush, deodorant, and other things she used. “My ball is downstairs. I’ll get it before we leave, and I think my water bottle is in the dishwasher. I’m going to go change for practice.” She pointed to a door across the hall, which I assumed to be her bathroom.

She grabbed athletic shorts and a t-shirt from atop her dresser and scurried across the hall. She was back five minutes later. The blue ribbon was gone. She grabbed a hoodie from her closet and stuffed it into her bag. “It can get cold.”

I trailed behind her as we moved back downstairs where she gathered the remainder of her things. She was efficient and knew what she needed. She filled her water bottle with ice and water. She grabbed two granola bars and a Gatorade from the fridge. Then she packed her bag, and shoved the soccer ball into it’s netted pocket. “Okay, I’m ready,” she informed me as she headed towards the door. She grabbed her key and began setting the alarm.

I found myself in awe. Where was my little girl? Bree was so different when she stayed with me during the summer, but she didn’t have such an established routine. We varied our days and I didn’t require much of them responsibility wise. They kept their rooms neat and cleaned their shared bathroom weekly.

“I can tell you how to get to Isla’s school so you don’t have to use GPS. It can get confused sometimes.” She guided me through several streets and we pulled into the parking lot of Newton Country Day.

It reminded me of something I would see on a college campus instead of an actual school. It was massive. It was a three story structure made from brick. It was grand and I was reminded of some English country estates.

Bree grabbed her bag and I followed her to the fields. The girls were just beginning to filter out, and some were already on the field playing.

I spotted Isla instantly. Her hair was pulled into a long ponytail atop her head. She was on the field making some practice shots. She was in workout attire and cleats. Claire must’ve been spending a fortune when the girls were outgrowing their cleats.

Bree handed me her bag and ran the length of the field, calling her sister’s name loudly. The other girls were nonplussed and treated it as an ordinary occurrence. A few of the girls smiled and greeted Bree as she passed them. Isla moved to the sidelines and dropped her stick as her sister’s body collided with hers.

I slid my phone out of my pocket to snap a pick of the two of them. These were the moments I didn’t get enough of, and had missed way too many.
“Excuse me, sir,” a woman in shorts and a Newton Country Day t-shirt came out, brandishing a clipboard. Her whistle was poised at her lips. “I will not hesitate to call the police. This is private property, and we do not-“

“Coach, wait he’s my dad.” It seemed to stop the woman short and several of Isla’s teammates turned their heads in my direction. It reminded me of Bree’s school all over again. “I promise he wouldn’t hurt anyone. He’s never seen me play. He got here from Scotland early this morning.”

Those seemed to be the magic words as the coach relaxed her posture and smiled at me. She offered her hand. “I’m Coach Thomas. You’ve got a fine young lady here. Isla is a talented center forward and we are lucky to have her on our team. Warm-ups begin in five Isla,” she told her as she headed towards the other girls.

Isla stared at me in complete wonderment. “Am I hallucinating?” She rubbed her eyes and blinked a few times, but the image was still the same. I was there at her school and about to watch her practice. “Dad, you’re actually here. Does mom know? Oh my gosh,” she squealed happily as she threw her arms around me.

It was amazing the progress she’d made since I last saw her. She was on pain medication and had all her injuries visible for everyone to see. Everything was healed up nicely the way the doctor said it would.

“I’m actually here,” I kissed her head and relished in the feeling of knowing I’d made a right decision. “I think yer teammates are waiting.”

She pulled back with pink cheeks. “Right, you can sit over there.” She pointed to a set of bleachers where Bree sat. “We will talk after practice.” She winked at me before running to her team.

The whole day was a surreal experience, and it wasn’t over yet.

-Stay, Rihanna and Mikky Ekko

Chapter End Notes

I do apologise for any inconsistencies. The time of night or I guess morning while conducive to writing, isn’t great for my overall mental state lol but I’ve been fixing as many as I can.
Stay With Me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**JPOV**

I watched mesmerized as Isla practiced with her teammates. Before they even began work on the field, they had their warm-ups. The girls ran a few laps around the field, stretched, and did some other basic exercises to get their heart rate up.

Isla didn’t even look to have broken a sweat. Bree read a book and didn’t seem the least bit interested. Occasionally her head bobbed up when the girls took to the field with sticks in hand.

She commented about Isla’s improvement since she first started the year before. “She was terrible last year,” she informed me quietly, her finger keeping tabs on her page. “At tryouts she was great, but her nerves got the best of her at the first few games. She got really good by the end of the season, and had such an amazing turnaround.”

Often, it surprised me the sorts of words the girls knew. They used all of these big words that I don’t think I began using until I was quite a bit older than they were.

“Isla only moved to center this season. Coach was impressed at tryouts especially since Isla wasn’t completely healed. She was a wing last year, but she practiced a lot in the spring even with softball.”

I don’t know how Claire managed to keep with either of their schedules and vigorous activities. I was only beginning to understand there was a difference between school related events and outside events. Isla played for her school softball team and another one in the spring. Somehow luck was on her side and she was able to do both at once. It baffled me how she still had the energy then in her spare time with homework and instruments to practice another sport entirely.

Were they human?

“How does Isla have time to sleep?” I asked Bree seriously.

She stuffed her fist in her mouth to stifle her giggles. “Dad,” she groaned and shook her head. “We do have weekends. All of Isla’s school games are on weekdays and sometimes they leave school early just to go. Her other games are on Saturday usually and then she has Sunday. She does all of her homework as soon as she can to have time for stuff.”

Did they have fun? All I saw was them constantly doing things. “Do you have fun?” The words slipped past my lips without me knowing.

“Of course, mommy always says if we don’t have fun then we should stop, but I can’t imagine not playing soccer. Isla likes being busy. She hates having downtime because she doesn’t like being bored.” Her ocean orbs rolled skyward at such an absurd notion. “We go on vacations. Besides Isla usually has until the end of February when they start practicing again, so she has time to rest.”

At a quarter to five, Bree left with her friend to go to her practice across town. Her backpack was draped over a shoulder as her and her little friend walked towards the parking lot, talking animatedly.

I hadn’t met any of their friends in the past because they were always visiting me, and it wasn’t
easy to make friends especially as the children were still in school when the girls visited. As they
got older, I think it became harder for them to spend so much time away from their friends during
their only time of freedom. At home, we attended school for several weeks and then had breaks,
but American schools didn’t run on the same schedule.

Isla was a strategic player and never allowed herself to be distracted for a moment. She worked
easily with her teammates and several of them seemed to defer to her despite the fact she was a
seventh grader. She was intent and focused on the actions on the field.

It was different watching her in this setting. Her and Mags played one on one back at Lallybroch,
but there was something intimately different about watching her with her team.

These were people who saw her regularly and who she spent a significant amount of time with on
and off the field. They had classes together and many probably knew more about her than I did.

Practice ended five minutes early. The coach came over to apologize yet again for her earlier
mistake. “Nah,” I waved her off. “I dinna mind in the slightest as ye were just protecting the girls
from someone you believed to be a predator. I’m Jamie Fraser, by the way,” I offered up my hand.

We chatted briefly before one of the players took her attention away with a few questions.

Isla soon arrived back on the field after changing back into her school clothes. I’d never seen how
either girl dressed for school. Claire occasionally sent a picture from the first and last day, but it
wasn’t the same as seeing it all in person.

It was reminding me of how old Isla actually was. She would be twelve soon enough, and Claire
had told me puberty had begun for our darling girl. Isla was embarrassed by all of it, and preferred
no mention of how her body was changing into that of a woman’s, not that I wanted to address
that with her either. She was my little girl, and I wasn’t prepared for her to be a teenager in just
over a year.

She wore a gingham button up tank with a black cardigan and black skinny jeans. On her feet
were red high top converse. I was suddenly assaulted with a teenaged version of the girl in front of
me.

How long before she found spending time with her dad was embarrassing? Was she already in
that state?

Claire didn’t talk much about what the girls were like here in their comfort zones where
everything was always familiar and comfortable for them. I didn’t even know what sort of music
Isla listened to or what television shows captured her interest. There were all these things I never
thought about in the past because I only had them for such a short time. It occurred to me I never
took the time to get to know them beyond what was on the surface.

Her backpack was full, she carried a gym bag on her shoulder, and her hockey stick in her other
hand. She offered a tired smile to me as I wrapped an arm around her and took her sports bag.

“So you showed up at Bree’s school?” I heard the curiosity she tried to bury and the burning
jealousy simmering underneath.

I unlocked the car and threw her bag in the trunk along with her stick. “Well I have realized that
yer ma and I have our issues to work through, but there’s also you and yer sister. I canna miss
anymore time with ye. You’re practically a teenager, and I want to go to games and recitals,
concerts, whatever because you’re my daughter. I couldna be more proud of ye if I tried.”

She discreetly turned to wipe her eyes and I hid a smile at the reminder of her mother in her.
“Thanks dad,” she mumbled softly as more tears fell down her freckled cheeks. “Do you know your way to the house?” Bree had navigated me down too many streets, and I wasn’t sure which ones I needed. Isla chuckled and shook her head. “Trust Bree to take the shortcut.”

Isla directed me and shortly later we pulled in front of the house. I didn’t park in the driveway as that was Claire’s spot and I would end up blocked in when she arrived home.

I followed Isla up the driveway to the door. She unzipped her front pocket and drew out her key, which she slid into the lock and turned with a soft click. The alarm sounded, but she was quick and typed in the code. Her bag dropped next to her sister’s, and then she went to the hall closet where she dumped her hockey stick.

“Uh, you can sit in the family room. I’ve got to drop this off in my room. Bree won’t be home until seven. We can watch a movie or something.” She shrugged nervously and I saw how uncomfortable she was with the turn of events. Claire was the same way. She wasn’t good with spontaneity. It threw her off and she was flustered and it sometimes made her irritable.

Everything went a specific way and then when it didn’t, Claire went into a complete frenzy. It’s one of the reasons she had anxiety attacks in the past.

I placed a hand on Isla’s shoulder. Her eyes drifted over to where I gently gripped her. “Sweetheart, I dinna want ye to get worked up. Soon enough, this will all seem normal and there won’t be any of this nervous energy between us. It’s new for the both of us, and I’m going along with it just like ye.”

Her shoulders relaxed under my touch and she took steady, deep breaths to calm herself down. “Can we order pizza?”

I smirked at her attempt to con me. “Yer ma already told me ye have leftovers.”

She rolled her eyes and stomped dramatically up the stairs. My daughters seemed to be throwing me into the wolves’ den with their regular behavior. Claire had told me Isla especially wasn’t always sunshine and sweet. She had a nasty side when she was angry about something, and made it quite known to anyone in the vicinity of her tantrum.

I walked into the living room and smiled at the window seat. I saw Bree laying there on rainy days, staring miserably at her wet surroundings. I pictured Claire on a cold, nippy winter day curling up with a fire raging and a book in her lap, a satisfied smile adorning her face. Finally, I imagined Isla doing her homework, erasing answers in her frustration or listening to music and tapping her fingers to notes unheard by everyone else.

I saw hours spent watching movies and eating popcorn, despite Claire protesting the unsaturated fat in movie theater butter popcorn. Although, she hate half the bowl herself, but typically denied she’d eaten a single handful. I always smiled and popped another bag and brought her a glass of water.

There was a bookshelf along the wall with medical, children, and young adult titles. There were a few pictures carefully placed on the shelves.

In one, Bree and Isla were perhaps a few years younger and dressed for Samhain. Bree was dressed as some sort of princess and Isla was as well.

“Oh that’s the year we were Anna and Elsa. They’re Disney royalty. Anna is the little sister and Elsa is the older one.” I was amazed how the blonde wig complimented her pale skin. “Bree didn’t have to do anything because Anna has reddish hair. We braided her hair. This was
Halloween almost four years ago.”

I did quick math and realized Isla was just eight years old in the photo and Bree was four almost five. Her new teeth were there in her big, cheesy smile.

“We were really into Frozen, nearly drove mom nuts with how many times we played the soundtrack or the movie.” Her eyes held a far away look. “We sometimes still watch it on lazy Sundays and if mom is off, we do it to annoy her.” She smirked at me.

My eyes drifted towards another framed photo. “That was Bree’s first snowboarding lesson. She face planted so many times. Mom was sure by the end of the day, she’d want to quit, instead Bree proclaimed it to be the best thing ever.” Isla shook her head in amusement at her sister’s antics. There was a fondness in her expression. “At the end of the day, she was smiling so hard and didn’t want to part with the snowboard.”

Bree wore bright pink snow pants with a white puffy jacket. She had a pink hat with a puff ball and snow goggles. Her hair clashed horribly with the brightness of the pink, but I felt the happiness radiating off of her. I’d say the picture wasn’t long after the Samhain one. I recalled our conversation over the summer in the pub when she informed me happily about finally having the opportunity to own a snowboard this upcoming winter season.

My eyes landed on a third frame. “That’s from when we went to Cape Cod before going to the Vineyard. We loved seeing the lighthouses. The active ones are so cool. We wanted a picture because it was so pretty.” She gushed, her finger stroking the still images. “I think this was two summers ago.”

The last photo drew my attention finally. “That’s from my first piano competition when I was seven. My instructor realized how at ease I was and how my fingers seemed to flow smoothly on the keys. I remembered my music and knew where all the notes were without having to check. He decided to talk to mom about entering me into a competition. We traveled to New York City. I actually placed third. Winners get to perform at this prestigious music hall.”

In the photo, Isla wore a royal blue dress embroidered with flowers and a bow on the waist. She had on black tights and black dress shoes. Her hair was in a fancy braid with a matching ribbon. She was all smiles in the empty musical hall.

“I play more for fun now. I only had T-ball in the spring. It left a lot of free time for me.” She shrugged helplessly. “Bree does soccer year round, but my sports are seasonal and rely on good weather.”

I noticed she changed her clothes when she was in her room. Instead of her school clothes, she wore leggings and a Newton hoodie. “Mom loves pictures and has so many around the house. It’s so embarrassing.” She groaned as she moved into the kitchen and began digging food out of the fridge.

I wasn’t all that hungry after lunch with Claire. I figured I’d eat when Bree arrived home.

Isla made herself a plate and warmed it up as she cleaned her mess in the kitchen. “Mom’s a neat freak and gets so uptight when we forget to clean.”

She had a piece of chicken and a hot dog. Then she scooped some potato salad and fruit onto her plate before coming to sit at the table. “What do you think of our house?”

“I like it. Yer ma has made a home for herself and you and yer sister, and it seems to be filled with a lot of love and happiness.”
She nodded as she stuffed her face. “We change things every once in a while. We replaced our old couches last year with the white ones and then got all those throw blankets. We have a little basket and wash them weekly.” Everything ran like clockwork in the house, and I was impressed with Claire for having them trained so well.

“How was yer first day back?” I found an opening for the topic I was most interested in regarding her.

She lifted her cup to her lips to take a drink of water. Her forked pushed some food around her plate as she thought about her answer. She was more contemplative than her sister, whereas Bree told every single detail about her day, her sister was less than forthcoming.

“It was good.” She finally said, before staking a slice of potato. “We didn’t really do much except go over the syllabi. Typical first day stuff.”

I was beginning to believe it was the age she was. In a month’s time she would be twelve year olds and didn’t feel like divulging every detail about her life to her parents.

I observed her as she ate her food. Her cheeks had filled out from the last time I’d seen her as she’d put weight back on. The bruises that marred her skin were completely gone. While her bones would always show the truth of her injuries and she’d have a scar from the ordeal the rest of her life, she had healed.

“Tomorrow I’ll probably come home with piles of homework. I’ve got to get a head start because our first game is next week.”

Why did neither of my daughters seem to believe in the concept of rest? They were constantly on the move like their mother and couldn’t hold still for a single moment. “Do ye need to get ahead?”

Her eyebrows climbed up her forehead. “Of course dad, if I want to maintain my four point GPA. It helps to have your work completed because you never know what can happen. Besides homework is fun.”

If I didn’t know better I would think my daughter was switched at birth, but then I thought about Claire who encouraged me to spend time investing in my home and school work. Her books were always open and if I couldn’t distract her with my lips, she made us do our homework.

Isla stared at me from across the table with a curious expression upon her not so small face. I saw how her face had aged from the small round head that barely fit into the palm of my hand. I saw her chest struggling to breathe. I remembered the tape on her eyes that prevented us from seeing what was underneath those translucent lids. There wasn’t a hint at the time what color her hair was because there wasn’t any, and her eyebrows were nonexistent at the time. She was a painting waiting for the artist.

She tilted her head in question and I realized I was staring at her as well. “Sometimes I remember how tiny you were and how your mother and I spent hours at your side wondering if you would live just one more night. We hoped and prayed, and then we finally decided that if we wanted you to stay with us, we needed to give you a name. Your mother also didn’t want you to die without having one either.” Her lashes lowered and nearly rested on her cheeks. They were so dark. “I remember when I first saw you in your mother’s arms. She cried so much because we thought the day would never arrive. She nursed you for the first time that day.”

November 2006

Isla spent the first five weeks of her life in an incubator, struggling for breath, attached to a
ventilator. She was given artificial substances to assist with keeping her lungs expanded. They weren’t fully developed because she was born six weeks too early. She had issues with jaundice as well. The sickly yellow of her skin horrified me at first because it was such an unnatural color. She was undressed and placed under specific lights with her eyes covered. The neonatologist wasn’t worried in the slightest. He had patients in the past who were born much earlier than our daughter, and didn’t find any reason for concern. She was barely four lbs. at birth, and lost a few ounces in her first week of life because of feeding difficulties.

Claire expressed her milk and the hospital stored it with labels. Isla was gaining weight and slowly but surely her breathing was improving. We were lucky.

As Isla wasn’t born too early, her lungs weren’t as undeveloped as some preemies who required long term oxygen treatment. The doctors happily informed us of her progress and how she was maintaining her weight at five lbs.

They’d taken her off the ventilator earlier that morning and she seemed to be holding her own. They had begun weaning her off the oxygen to determine the strength of her lungs. They’d done x-rays, which showed her lungs were fully expanded.

Her face was fuller, not much, but it was a better sight than the tiny baby we saw when she was first born.

“Alright, which one of you would like to hold her first?” While my arms ached to hold my baby girl, I’d seen the distress Claire experienced over the last few weeks. She carried such a deep guilt over not being able to carry our daughter to term. She blamed herself for all the pain our daughter suffered since she was born. It was unhealthy how many hours Claire spent at the hospital. I tried multiple times to coerce into sleeping at home in her own bed, but she wasn’t easily dissuaded. She was adamant she was to stay for however long our daughter’s stay was. She contact her instructors early on, and she went on medical leave from the school.

I nodded at Claire with her hopeful, watery eyes. “Why don’t you sit Mrs. Fraser?” The neonatal nurse suggested, noticing the nervous energy surrounding Claire.

Ever since she heard the possibility of finally holding our daughter, not just touching her, there was a glow about her.

Claire licked her lips and did as the nurse suggested. She sat and I saw her mentally preparing herself for this momentous occasion. The nurse opened the incubator to reveal a tiny infant with pink flushed skin. It was a stark contrast to the baby with the yellow skin. She lifted her gently into her arms, and then set her into Claire’s shaking ones.

Instantly before my eyes, my wife transformed into a full fledged mother. It wasn’t a title for her anymore but an actual reality. There was a human being depending on her/us for everything. We were responsible for how she turned out as a person, her education, and everything else until we were both long and gone. She may not agree with that position one day, but I don’t think either of us cared.

The role of parent wasn’t something we imagined so soon, but with her here, it was hard to picture a life where she didn’t exist. She was everything we didn’t know we wanted or needed. We’d always had more hypothetical conversations about children and it was more of a concept than anything concrete.

Claire brushed her fingers against Isla’s tiny cheek, and Isla turned her head into the warm touch
of her mother. She already knew how to seek the comfort her mother would readily offer at any moment.

I pulled out my phone and snapped the moment. Claire didn’t notice with her attention so focused on our daughter, but the nurse winked at me.

“Do you want to breastfeed Mrs. Fraser? Isla hasn’t fed in two hours.” Claire’s startled orbs sought mine and I nodded at her. They both needed the time to bond and breastfeeding was one of the easiest ways for mother and child to form an everlasting connection.

The nurse instructed Claire on what to do and how to help Isla to latch on. It was a natural instinct for babies to root and latch. All they required was a bit of an assistance and then they knew how to suckle all on their own.

Tears dripped down my nose as I stared at my two girls. It wasn’t just the two of us anymore, but the three of us.

Claire kissed her little, bald head. We were assured the hair would come in and some babies stayed bald for a longtime. There was no reason to worry as it was likely she probably would’ve been born without hair if she hadn’t come early.

“I love you so much, more than I thought I could,” she whispered to the nursing baby.

Isla was content to stay in her mother’s arm as she fed. It was too beautiful for my eyes. I wanted to keep this moment close to me forever because we were parents. We created the miracle baby with our love. I knew Claire would agree if I said she was the best work we’d ever done in our life and would forever remain our greatest accomplishment.

I had to amend the statement two years later when her little sister decided to join us and make our family complete.

Isla smiled shyly as she fought to control her emotions. “Sorry,” she apologized as a few tears sprinkled her cheeks. Our family always seemed to be crying for one reason or another. “Mom doesn’t really talk about that time at all. I guess it makes her sad. Could I-“ her voice died off and she broke eye contact.

“Could you what?”

“See the picture sometime?” She bit her lip with an anxious gleam in her eyes.

I pulled out my phone and unlocked it. I opened my photo albums and began searching for the picture. I slid it across the table for Isla to take a look. She tried to appear as if she wasn’t all that curious, but she grabbed the phone and stared mesmerized at the sight of her and her mother.

Claire’s hair was thrown up into a messy bun. She wore a Harvard hoodie and jeans. Her face was scrubbed clean, although she didn’t really wear make-up in those days.

Isla was all limbs. She was an itty, bitty baby with a sweet face. “I was so tiny,” she murmured, eyes still glued to the screen. “Are you sure that’s me?”

I chuckled at her. “Of course, I think I would know my own daughter. You came six weeks too early and spent five weeks in the hospital. I can’t even begin to explain how it felt to take you home. I was nervous to have you in the car, and nearly drove your mother mad with how slow I drove. She wanted to be at the apartment already to get you settled, but I was worried because we had precious cargo.”
Her cheeks flushed with mortification. “Dad,” she warned playfully. “Let me clean up my plate, and then I’ll give you the official house tour. Mom always forgets when people haven’t been to the house before and never shows them around.”

She rinsed her plate and placed it in the dishwasher. She then set her water glass on the counter. “I use it when I go to bed so I don’t use a bunch in a day. Mom has a rule. If we are only drinking water, we use one glass a day. She hates when all of the cups are gone and she finds them around the house filled with water.”

I followed her into the family room. “This is the family room, but you’ve already seen it. We have our bookcase with so many books. Those are the ones we share. Bree stores hers under her bed and mom has an office.” She led me into another room. “This is the formal dining room. We mostly eat in here on special occasions like birthdays, thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. It leads out to our terrace.” She opened the glass paneled door, which opened up to their terrace and their backyard. There were a few trees and I saw Claire’s garden nestled in between two trees.

“Mom plants her flowers and some herbs every spring.” We went back into the house. She led me through another doorway. “This is the formal living room. We host guests in here. Although I guess we should’ve thought about the white furniture.” She shrugged her shoulders.

There was a giant fireplace occupying an entire wall. It was between the two doorways. On the other wall, there was a giant entryway from the foyer. They had two white armchairs and a white loveseat with a light blue rug. In the center was a small coffee table with a small potted plant. The walls were decorated with art, which was something I’d always known Claire appreciated. She thought paintings created a nice aesthetic. The armchairs had little blue pillows. All of the furniture in the room was quite fancy.

I was surprised not to find a single stain. “Mom doesn’t allow food or drinks in here.” Isla explained to me.

Their family room had been a little less formal with a long, white sectional and lots of pillows. There was a decent sized television mounted above the fireplace. It was such an airy house with lots of light flowing through the place.

She led me out of the formal living room and down the hall to a lone door. “Down there is the basement, we mostly just use it for storage.”

Then we went up the stairs and I followed her. “I’m sure Bree probably showed you her room.” I nodded my head affirmatively. “This is her bathroom.” She opened the door to reveal a pristine bathroom. It was neat and orderly, and way cleaner than their shared bathroom when they were at my house.

The walls were Tiffany blue with some sort of swirl texture that was glittery and popped out of the wall. She had a marble sink with a hair accessories organizer thing. I saw all of her hair ties, ribbons, clips, and hair bands. She had a lot. Her name was all stenciled onto the white wood container. In the corner was a woven owl hamper with wings and eyes. Her shower curtain was mostly the color of a pool with a shock of royal navy at the bottom. She had a matching bath mat.

She had white wooded shelves with several polka dotted towels in multiple colors. I also noticed a waterproof speaker in the shower. “Bree listens to a lot of loud music when she showers. She sings a lot too.”

When we exited the bathroom, she took me further down the hall which I had yet to explore. She opened a different door to reveal an office area. “The sofa is a pull out, and if we have a guest they sleep in here. Mom does some work in here sometime.”
There was a little white sofa with black decorative pillows. She had more framed photos of the girls, and a bookshelves built into the wall with dozens more titles. A computer desk sat on one wall with a Mac desktop. A kindergarten school photo of each girl sat on both sides. She had an organizer for her pens, pencils, and highlighters. There was also a brand new pad of sticky notes. Claire had a fondness for leaving reminders for herself everywhere. Next to the keyboard was a leather journal. I had given her a set of journals for her twenty-fifth birthday because I knew how much she enjoyed having somewhere to express her feelings. I was glad to see her still using them.

Isla closed the door. “So this is my room.” She led me into the large space.

There was a skylight which added to the brightness of the room, although the sunlight was slowly fading. She had another window, which she decorated with a navy colored valance.

In the center of her room was a queen sized, iron framed open canopy bed. Curved and angled arches met in the center to form the canopy. Hanging from the center was a sheer golden colored canopy that twisted along the curves and down the poles of the bed. Her bedspread was white with a ruffled sort of look. She had a white fringe bed skirt. Gold stars hung along her walls, providing a wonderful affect against the white of her walls. She had a string of lights as well, but unlike her sister, there weren’t any photos clipped. Her lights were wrapped around the poles of her bed, although they were currently turned off.

She had a simple, white fuzzy rug. Seeing their actual bedrooms, solidified the difference between my daughters. While the pink in Bree’s room was muted, it was still a bit more on the girly side. Isla preferred something less showy.

On the wall, were little musical note decals that traveled along the length of her room and stopped above her desk. Her desk was organized. She had her music organized into binders in a magazine caddy. She had two different pencil cups. One was filled with pens and mechanical pencils, and the other with her color pencils and a pair of scissors. Next to the desk was a pin board divided into thirds with white boards. One whiteboard was a calendar with Isla’s schedule written out for the next month. She had practice three days a week with a game every Thursday. On Saturdays, she had music lessons from nine until one.

Sundays were the only days she had marked as free. There was the occasional Friday, she left blank.

Her To Do List was marked with reminders for the day. Her pin board held cards and pictures of her with her friends. She had so many, and I realized she never talked about them. The same few girls appeared in multiple.

In one of the photos, she was positioned between two girls who looked a bit older than her. “Those are my big sisters. The one on the right with the brown hair is Ellie. She’s in tenth grade this year. She was my first big sister. The blonde is Mally. Her real name is Mallory, but she hates that. This was at my birthday party last year.”

Isla wore a green sweater and jeans with a gigantic smile on her face. Her hair was in a side braid. The two older girls had their arms wrapped tightly around her. “They’re really cool. The school assigns eighth graders to the girls in the young graders to help with the transition. We all ended up on the blue team. We have a school wide competition between the silver and blue teams. The teams earn points during the school year and the one with the most wins the Blue-Silver trophy.” She pointed to a picture of her from what was clearly last year. Her team had won the trophy. “This is my last year to be assigned a big sister as next year I get to be one.”

She had no idea that her statement could be interpreted in more than one way. My mind
immediately drifted to our child in Claire’s belly. He/she wasn’t any bigger than a kidney bean currently as Claire was roughly eight weeks along. It was strange to think our child wasn’t even a fully formed human yet. I remember how she told me the three different stages of development, and the baby would be in the embryonic stage as it wasn’t yet a fetus.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts before I had anymore about the baby. I didn’t need Isla thinking my behavior was strange.

Her walls also had little star hook mirrors which she draped necklaces and scarves around. “I don’t actually use those mirrors. I have one on my bathroom door.”

She had photo box frames that comprised of a photo of her and her sister. They were standing outside St. Peter’s together on what was clearly Bree’s first day of school. In the next photo, she was surrounded by a bunch of other girls and their hockey sticks. They were in full uniform and smirked at the camera as if they were too cool to actually smile. In another photo, Bree and Isla were at a park. One laid on one bench and the other on the bench next to it. They made goofy faces for the camera.

It was strange to note how different their lives truly were. Their wholes lives were wrapped up in this one city, and I felt a bit guilty for dragging them away each summer.

The time when kids can run wild and free with their friends, they were in a country where they knew no one except their family. I knew they enjoyed the time with me, but it hurt to see their solemn faces on rainy days or when I had to work and leave them home or take them to the pub with me.

They played on their iPads or FaceTimed with their friends. They missed out on opportunities with their schools and sports.

“Dad,” Isla waved her hand in front of my face. I blinked hard, slightly disoriented. “Earth to dad, are you okay?” Her face was the picture of concern. “Do you need water?”

“I’m fine. I just got a bit in my head.” She smiled unsure of my honesty. “Show me yer bathroom.”

Her bathroom was attached to her room, but had a second door that led to the hallway. “Well this is my bathroom.” It was a ruffled white shower curtain and I was starting to understand how much she adored the shade of white.

On her counter, she had a hair straightener, a curling wand, and a blow dryer. “Sorry, I forgot to move these when I cleaned my bathroom.” She opened the cabinet doors underneath her sink to reveal organized white baskets. Inside, she had all of her hair accessories. They were in labeled pouches. She wrapped up the cords and put them in the styling tools basket.

She had a white rug as well. There were tiny rhinestones embedded into the walls of her shower. She also had a Bluetooth speaker in her bathroom. She had regular cotton bath towels in bright colors. “I would show you mom’s room, but I’m not allowed in there without permission.”

At least they respected their mother’s privacy when she wasn’t around. I snooped in my parents’ room all the time when I was younger. I called it an adventure.

Isla led me out into the hallway and we went back down the stairs into the family room. She turned on the television. “I have to wait a few minutes if we want to watch Netflix or Hulu. The TV has to connect to the Wi-Fi first.” It was already seven.

Bree would be home soon enough and I would have alone time with the girls for the first time
since Isla’s accident.

Isla switched from cable to Netflix. Her watch list was full of teen shows. It came with the age to no longer want to watch shows directed at children. She picked some show called The 100.

“I’m only on season three,” she told me as she continued from where she left off.

Ten minutes into the show and I was fascinated. I was a bit confused as to the events prior, and Isla tried explaining but was too distracted by what was happening onscreen.

Around half past seven, a key was heard in the door. The distinct sound of a bag dropping alerted me to the presence of my youngest daughter. Bree traipsed into the room and flopped down onto the couch. “Move over,” she shoved Isla’s legs out of the way.

Isla aimed a kick at her sister and soon it was resolved before I had to step in. “How was practice?”

“It was okay. We had three kids not show up, which was annoying. They didn’t text coach or anything so next practice we all have to run laps.” Bree sounded weary and upset. “It isn’t even fair. Coach wants to teach the team a lesson about commitment and responsibility.”

“Aw I’m sorry little sis. Well how was your first day of school? Did you think Mrs. Nicholson was awesome?”

The show was on pause as the girls caught up with each other about their days. “I’m going to go eat dinner.”

“Oh I think dad said something about eating with you.”

Bree did a double take as if only just now identifying my presence. “Oh my god, daddy I forgot you said you would be here.”

*Clearly,* I thought dryly. “Yes, yer sister and I have spent some quality time together. She gave me the full tour of the house.”

“Well come on, I’m starving.” She dragged me into the kitchen where she began to pull out the leftovers. “There’s one steak left from two nights ago. Mommy didn’t want it. She felt a bit sick.”

As we ate together, she told me about practice and the drills they ran. “Lucy caught all of the balls when we tried to make a goal. She’s the best goalie we’ve ever had.” She boasted proudly. “We joined at the same time, but she was originally defense before we switched positions. She plays goalie at all of our games.”

Bree prepared herself a cheeseburger, grapping a slice of American to put over her burger before she reheats it. She then proceeds to pull out slices of tomato, lettuce, ketchup and mayo. She grabbed the plate with the steak and offered it to me. I took it from her.

She moved around the kitchen as if it were common. “Mommy doesn’t let me use knives yet.” She told me as she spooned fruit onto her place. “She pre-cuts everything. She says I can use them when I’m more attentive.” Her eyes rolled.

Her attention diverted to the beeping of the microwave and soon she’s dressing her burger. I watched the whole thing with a sense of pride for my offspring. Claire raised them well. They both seemed to have a healthy sense of fear of their mother, and didn’t disobey directives. They cleaned after themselves. They knew how to operate within a kitchen. They knew their routines without constant reminder, and I wondered how long it really took Claire to drill all of this into
their heads.

Bree also grabbed an open bag of Lays off the counter. She held her fingers up to her lips. I decided to allow her the one treat after all it was her first day and she had a surprise practice.

I reheated my steak. “There’s steak sauce on the side of the fridge,” Isla mentioned as she entered the kitchen.

She went straight for the freezer, grabbing a carton of mint chocolate chip ice cream. She opened a cabinet and pulled down a bowl. She searched in a drawer for the ice cream scooper and then grabbed a spoon. She scooped her ice cream, then grabbed some chocolate sauce from the fridge. She rinsed the scooper, but left it in the sink.

The three of us ate at the table and it was the most normal thing. I hadn’t actually expected that feeling to overcome me. “So dad, what are you going to do? Isn’t your job back in Scotland?” Isla spooned some ice cream and took a big bite.

Bree’s attention was on me. Her eyes stared unblinkingly at me. She was waiting for my answer.

“I’ve applied for a green card. I also accepted a job with a financial firm here in the city. Once a month I’ll fly back to check on the business, but for the most part the place runs itself. My place is here with you guys.”

Isla frowned at me. “What about mom? Are you back together? You know she just broke things off with Peter. Is it appropriate for you to be messing with her feelings?”

I sat back and scrutinized her. Isla had a fierce protective glint in her dark eyes. Her protectiveness was for her mother who she didn’t want hurt if I decided to return home, which I wasn’t intending especially with the new baby on the way. I could understand her hesitation after everything she’s gone through between her mother and I.

Her mother was the most important figure in her life, and she didn’t want her emotionally destroyed by heartbreak.

“I thought ye didn’t like Peter.”

Her arms folded across her chest as her look hardened. “So? It doesn’t mean that I want her in another relationship even if it’s with you. Why now?” She was a smart, young girl. Wise, probably too wise for her age, but that was the thing about Isla. She’d been a precocious tot from the moment she discovered the world. By two, she’d caught up with all of her milestones, and one would never know the toddler running around, observing the world was a premature baby.

Bree matched her sister’s look and crossed her arms as well.

I cleared my throat uncomfortably, taken aback by the turn of events. The entire day they’d displayed nothing but enthusiasm over my appearance, and while that may have been their initial feelings on the matter, they also had other thoughts as well.

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. “When I saw yer mam again after so many years, we spent time talking. I realized how much I still loved her and what we had given up.” I couldn’t go into too much detail because as precocious as they were, they were still children at the end of the day. There were things parents didn’t talk with their children about.

“When we made the decision to get divorced, we thought more about ourselves than the two of you. I was angry at her.” Their faces scrunched up adorably as they tried to understand my explanation. “Sometimes people can be selfish. It’s sort of like when you do a math problem.”
Their eyebrows rose up in confusion. “All of the numbers are important together, but if you only focus on one number, you can’t figure out the problem. Yer mam and I only focused on one part instead of the whole thing.”

Bree was the first to ask the follow up question, I expected. “What were the other parts?”

“Ye ken ye had a brother?” They nodded their heads. “Well yer ma and I were having difficulties. I worked a lot. Yer ma had the two of you and school, and we weren’t handling it well at all. I shirked on my responsibilities.”

“What does shirk mean?” Bree looked at me with openness and trust.

I traced patterns on the table. “It means avoiding something. I was supposed to be home for dinner and our nighttime routine. I worked on weekends instead of being home. Then when yer mother got pregnant with your brother, I was mad at her.”

“Why? Our priest says babies are a blessing.” Isla was suspicious of me and regarded me with a healthy dose of skepticism.

“Bree was barely two months old, and we were going to have another child. We lived in a small apartment, only two bedrooms and one bathroom. My job expected a lot from me. Yer ma and I were drifting apart, and I reacted badly when she told me about Gabriel. Everything was complicated. After he died, we couldn’t look at each other anymore. There was an empty space where he was supposed to be.”

Bree bobbed her head as Isla pursed her lips with judgment in her eyes. “Are you going to marry mommy again?”

I coughed loudly aware their full attention was on me. They wanted to know my intentions in the long run. In their eyes, I wasn’t someone who stuck around. I was their dad when they visited for two months or when mommy was being unfair 3000 miles away.

“Well I,” I shifted in my seat, not sure what the right answer was to the question. “I guess it depends on your mother. I love her so much, but we have to ken one another again. There’s a lot about her I don’t ken anymore and the same for her. We don’t want to rush anything because you guys could get hurt.”

Isla sensed there was something else at play. She didn’t come outright and say it, but I saw it in her eyes.

“You’re on probation,” Isla declared and Bree supported her sister’s decision. “We will be watching you dad. If mom cries once because of you…” she let the threat hang in the air as she began to clean her and her sister’s mess. Bree was appreciative of the offer and wiped down the table when I went to clean my own dish. Bree then swept the floor as Isla took out the trash. They were a good team, and I was glad they had each other. Everyone needed a sister. It was almost hard to picture one without the other at this point.

Bree missed her sister more than she would admit over the summer. When Isla returned from the outside, the two of them began to trek upstairs to get ready for bed.

I missed when they were young and required assistance for every little task. I supervised brushing teeth, I read stories and tucked them in, and I gave goodnight kisses before checking the room for monsters. There weren’t any monsters anymore, at least not the fictional kind.

They returned downstairs around eight thirty in their pajamas. Bree’s hair was undone and wet. Isla placed her wet hair in some sort of knot on her head and took her position back on the couch.
“Let’s watch a movie. I don’t like The 100.” Bree snatched the remote from her sister and selected the last Thor movie. Isla didn’t object although there was a scowl firmly in place on her face.

At some point, I drifted from the excitement of the day and the traveling from the night before. My body was physically exhausted. A warm hand pressed against my cheek. My eyes fluttered open to the sight of a worn out Claire. “Sassenach,” I murmured softly.

Her lips tipped into a tender smile reserved only for me. She held a finger up to her lips and gestured to the girls who were curled up on the couch. A blanket was draped over both sleeping forms.

“I guess they were tired,” she whispered, her eyes lingering on them fondly. “Did they eat dinner?” I nodded. “Is the kitchen clean?” Another nod. “Oh good, sometimes they forget to put back food or clean up, and then we have ants in the kitchen.”

Ah, it all made sense why the girls were worried about the state of the kitchen. I was well are of my Sassenach’s status as a clean freak. She simply couldn’t stand for any sort of disorganization. When the girls were young and played in the dirt, she immediately bathed the girls upon returning home. Their cheeks were pink from the efforts of Claire’s scrubbing.

“Sorcha,” I said quietly, the words disappearing into the darkness of the night.

CPOV

I was tired as I finished the end of my shift. My feet ached and I was a bit fatigued. I wanted to crawl into my bed and never wake up. However, I knew the next morning as soon as my alarm went off that particular dream would die.

I didn’t hate work. It was just exhausting currently. I also had less patience than usual with my residents, which didn’t help matters. They were more terrified of me than usual. I was a bit irritable and less forgiving of their mistakes than normal.

Joe sent some strange looks in my direction whenever I chewed out one of the residents. “Are you okay LJ?” His face wrinkled with concern for me.

I waved off his worried. “I’m fine.” I went back to reviewing charts for surgery the following day. “I’ve got an upset stomach is all.”

I could tell he wasn’t satisfied with my response, but it was too soon to be divulging the news about my pregnancy. I wasn’t out of the first trimester yet, and I didn’t want to jinx anything after the difficulties with my previous pregnancy. Joe was a support in my life, and I’d used him as a crutch in the aftermath of my marriage. He helped me find a therapist, especially after holding my hair after I tossed up my stomach contents when I drank too much. I cried far too much about my failures. He was a sympathetic ear and recommended me finding help because he was worried about what happened to me and the girls.

His lips thinned considerably, but he didn’t contest my words. He suspected I was hiding something from him and in truth I was. I hadn’t told him about what happened to Jamie and I nor that he had returned to Boston. I figured he would find out at some point.

I stretched my arms over my head to help lower the tension in my lumbar region. If there was anything about pregnancy I was recalling, it was how the body turned against you. In the last few months especially, the body ached all over. It was miserable. With Bree, my back always hurt, my feet as well. She was quite larger than her sister and I was ready to evict her when her due date
arrived. She’s lucky she decided to come the actual day.

Joe remained silent, but he kept glancing at me from the corner of his when he thought I wasn’t paying attention. I was annoyed with him for not believing me even if I was lying. Regardless, he should know I would tell him the truth when I was ready.

Before I had the opportunity to address his staring issue, I quickly got up and rushed for the restroom, knocking the chair over in my rush.

I hated morning sickness more than anything. It was miserable and complete and utter crap. I rinsed out my mouth with water from the tap. The second trimester was the best one. I always felt at my best. The morning sickness was gone and I was able to stomach food again. My girth wasn’t too wide yet, but my belly would grow weekly as the baby got bigger. The third was the worst. There was no such thing as a comfortable position. I felt huge like a whale. I waddled. It was unpleasant. The only thing that made pregnancy in its’ entirety worth it was holding your baby at the end of it all. It was a magical feeling staring into the face of a tiny, new human you helped create. I wondered if that’s how god felt every time a baby was born.

There was a knock on the door, and I sighed irritably. I pulled open the door angrily and stopped short at Joe with raised brows. His eyes were narrowed, but I saw the emotion in his dark eyes. He was extremely worried about me. I’d been acting strange, and he probably heard me retching.

I walked with him back to the break room. “Okay Joe, why don’t you ask?”

“Are you sick?”

I was taken aback by the bluntness. My face must’ve registered my shock because he shifted under my gaze. “No, I’m pregnant.”

He was stumped. His mouth fell open and he stared at me in total shock. He sputtered uncontrollably as he tried to gain control over his words. “Y-y-you’re p-pregnant?”

“Yes around eight-ish weeks.” His eyes were wide and full of surprise. “I guess that’s the last answer you were expecting from me.” He gave a firm nod. His eyes lingered on my stomach as if he could see through the table.

“Is the father Peter? Does he know? Did you suspect? Is that why you called it off?”

It never occurred to me prior to this moment that my co-workers might assume the baby was my ex’s. It wasn’t wrong for them to assume as we were together, but Peter and I never had unprotected sex. The timing also wasn’t right for the conception either.

If there was anything else I could do to hurt the man, this would be it. Everyone would know my shame and how I cheated on my boyfriend with my ex-husband, father of my children. There was sure to be resulting hospital gossip when news of my pregnancy broke. Hospitals ran amok with gossip and I would start showing sooner or later.

Tears stung my eyes as I realized all the ramifications. I was a private person, but if the baby wasn’t Peter’s, then assumption was I was unfaithful to him. I shook my head and lowered my eyes to case files.

Joe’s body language softened as he reached across the table and covered my hand. “Oh LJ,” he murmured softly.

“I didn’t mean for it to happen. It was an accident, but then we got carried away and forgot about protection. It was dumb and I’m a doctor and should know better.” I sniffled pathetically.
Joe tilted up my chin. “Claire, we are all human. We sometimes forget that just because we are doctors, it doesn’t mean we aren’t prone to make the same mistakes as our patients. Doctors forget protection. It can be life altering, but you already have two girls at home and can give love to a third.”

Joe was amazing at pep talks and always made me feel better in the end. He was an impartial ear to talk to as he listened before offering any sort of advice. “Can I ask about the father?”

I buried my face in my hands and mumbled out the name. I was an emotional wreck and wasn’t coping with the flood of hormones. I hated being all weepy.

“I’m sorry but I thought you said it was Jamie.”

I peeked at him from the cracks between fingers with a sheepish expression. “I did say that.”

“When?”

“The night before I came back home. One thing to another and well you know…” I didn’t feel the need to tell him everything. There were some boundaries we kept in our friendship. If I wanted to talk about those things, I went to Mel.

He sunk into his chair and had a silent, contemplative look. “So there’s no possibility of it being Peter’s?”

I shook my head in the negative. “Alright, have you told the father to be?”

“Today, he’s moved back to Boston.” I admitted to him. “He showed up at Bree’s school and we walked her in together. He’s with Isla now. She texted me earlier to tell me he picked her up from practice.”

“Do you want to be with him?” Joe had seen all the destruction and havoc, but he was also there during the good times. There were good times where we were undeniably happy and the couple everyone envied. They loved our little girl.

I remembered in the last year how he stopped showing up at parties and dinners with me and my friends. He was always ‘busy’. We picked fights because it was easier than talking through our issues.

I rested my head in my palm. “You know Joe I think I do. I’ve forgotten how he makes me feel because I’ve spent all this time being bitter. I was wrapped up in the past and denied my daughters all these things. I’m not saying it’s all entirely my fault, but I will admit I do take part in the responsibility. We don’t always get a second chance to fix our mistakes, and I feel that if I don’t take this one, there won’t be another one to come around.”

He held his hands up when he caught the defensiveness in my tone. “I’m not here to judge you. I’ll support you with whatever you want to do. It’s your life and no one can decide it but you.”

“Thanks Joe,” I told him.

By ten, we were packed and ready to leave the hospital. “I’ve got to relieve Jamie. He’s had the girls since they got out of school. I’m sure he’d like to go home and get some sleep.”

Joe gave me a warm hug. His hugs had the ability to comfort and soothe and make all my worries disappear. “Love ya, LJ. You’re strong, and you and Jamie will figure it all out. I’ll talk to the wife and we’ll invite all four of you over for dinner this weekend.”
I waved goodbye before unlocking my door. By the time I reached home, all I wanted was to crawl into bed.

Jamie’s car was parked on the street and I sent him a silent thank you for his thoughtfulness. I wasn’t in the mood to have to move my car for him to leave. I unlocked the door and disarmed the alarm. I would arm it again after Jamie departed. The house was dark except from the light coming from the family room.

I peeked my head in and the sight before me warmed me to my very core. Jamie had his head tilted back in our recliner. Both girls were curled up in their pajamas. I grabbed blankets from our basket and tucked them around each girl. I’d let them spend the night on the sofa and if they woke up, they could walk themselves to their bed.

I cupped his cheek, warm from sleep. He leaned into my touch as his eyes slowly fluttered open. “Sassenach,” and I couldn’t help the silly grin that formed on my face.

Fondness overcame me as I stared down at the love of my life. He was everything I need and more.

“I guess they were tired.” I whispered, my eyes focused on the sleeping forms of our daughters. “Did they eat dinner?” He nodded. “Is the kitchen clean?” Another nod. “Oh good, sometimes they forget to put back food or clean up, and then we have ants in the kitchen.”

It was one of my biggest pet peeves with them. They were improving on that particular problem. They tried to clean up either as they were doing whatever it is they do in the kitchen, or right after they ate.

After the last row we had about it, they knew not to cross me about the issue again. I’d grounded them for two weeks. It was miserable for all three of us.

“Sorcha,” he murmured quietly, his voice and the term of endearment stoking the flames in my heart.

I leaned down and pressed my lips to his.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed this. It got way longer than I thought it would. The words seemed to keep coming. It’s at 22 pages and when I began to write last night, I was on page 4.

I am also going to begin posting twice a week. Tuesdays and Fridays will be my posting days. My goal is to finish the story by September. Fingers crossed I can actually do it.
I apologize for the delay in posting. There were a few things I needed to add, but was too tired to do last night. Also I'm super happy because this story has over 20,000 views, and that's all because of you guys. So thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JPOV

Her mouth blossomed like a moon flower at night. I explored it’s depths with my tongue and enjoyed the fire in my veins.

I knew all she was offering was a kiss, and I took it. My hand snaked into her hair as I pulled her closer to me, wanting our bodies to somehow merge so I wouldn’t ever lose this feeling. She sighed into my mouth and her hands kept a tight hold on my shirt. I kept a firm hand on her back to keep her from falling over.

I wrenched my mouth away before either of us could get too carried away. Our daughters were asleep barely three feet from us. My eyes tracked her tongue as she licked her lips and smiled coyly at me. She was the temptress of desire and knew how to play a good flirting game.

I wagged a finger at her. “Ye think yer clever?”

She nodded her head, her lips almost an inch from mine. I could feel the breath from her parted lips, but she kept herself just out of my grasp.

“That’s your good night kiss.”

My lips curled up and I nearly laughed from the silliness of it all. I felt like a young teenager again with his head in the clouds dreaming about the woman before me when she was just a girl.

I took my cues from her as I didn’t want to wear out my welcome. I wanted our relationship to work, and part of that was respecting boundaries she had in place. We couldn’t sleep together. It wasn’t like she could get more pregnant, but we’d already mucked things up by having sex. Sex with feelings involved was always complicated, and we weren’t exactly dealing with our issues in a healthy manner.

She followed me as I walked to the door. Her eyes lingered on my lips before she stood on her toes to kiss the side of my mouth. “If you’d like, you’re welcome to take the girls to school tomorrow. I’m sure they’d enjoy that. Tomorrow I’m not schedule to go in until ten and I have two back to back surgeries, and a few consults with some colleagues. I also have a skills lab to teach.” Her fingers brushed at the curls on the sides of my face.

Her touch was careful yet sure. I knew she was frustrated with the way things were between us as well, but neither of us was in a position to rush our relationship. We weren’t young anymore without responsibilities aside from school and our jobs. We had kids and we wanted it to last.

“Well maybe ye can call me?” I hated how it sounded more like a question than a statement. I was hesitant to push her in any specific direction because I wanted her to want this as much as I did.
We already screwed up in the past. It was time for us to be reborn from the ashes of our past.

“I can do that,” her lips tipped up in a soft smile as her hand dropped to her side.

I ached for her warm touch again. “Alright, I’ll be by for the girls in the morning.”

“If you arrive early enough, you can be here for breakfast. It’s usually around six thirty.”

It was difficult to remember the last time I was awake so early in the morning, especially as I was in a completely different time zone that was five hours behind the one I left behind.

It would be an adjustment for sure, but I wanted to have these family moments, to savor everything because soon enough the girls would be gone and getting on with their lives. They were young in the present, but it seemed as if they were just little monkeys climbing all over the place and then suddenly they became fully capable people.

“Also, the girls aren’t always so tidy. You probably received the full tour, and the only reason everything is clean upstairs is because we cleaned over the weekend for the party.” Her lips twitched and I watched with the dim light from the television as mirth filled those golden colored eyes of hers.

Well that made a lot more sense. The girls and I usually battled about them cleaning their bathroom. They disliked the mere suggestion of it and fought me tooth and nail. Bree hated picking up her toys or art supplies she left lying around.

Isla’s room was usually a dumping ground for all of her clothes. I wasn’t sure how she managed to have so many at my house, but they were all there. It was scary in a way to think it wasn’t her entire wardrobe either. She had her winter clothes at home that she probably got more use from than the spring-ish clothes she brought with her to Scotland.

Claire’s eyes fluttered tiredly. She was exhausted and probably wanted to simply crawl into her bed. I kissed her softly, not deepening the kiss, although I was surprised she tried. I pulled back and our foreheads rest against one another.

“I love you,” I told her. “It took sometime for me to reach the same conclusion I did at sixteen, but Claire Elizabeth Fraser, you’re everything to me. You fill my life with meaning and purpose.”

Her mouth quivered as she choked back a broken sob. I wrapped her up in my arms and held her. I soaked in the feeling of her. I realized I could touch her without feeling guilt I was taking something away from another man who’d done nothing wrong except love her.

She opened her mouth when I placed my fingers over her lips. “Don’t say it yet Claire. I know ye want to, but I wanted to give this to you. Ye’ve given me a family and yerself, and I dinna ken where I’d be if ye hadna fallen into my lap that day on the train. I didna think fate would reunite us if ye left. I didna have the bollocks to ask ye for yer number, and ye only showed a mild interest in me.”

She was the most beautiful girl I’d seen. There were girls who desired me at home and at my school, but none of them captured my attention the way she did on the train that day. She sat there with her head against the window. She blinked and her lids lowered each time until she was nearly asleep.

I noticed how her fingers were crossed in her lap. She was all alone, and I wanted to give her company. I’d talk to her everyday if she’d allow it.

There was something about her that wasn’t like all the others. She had a spark. There was the
marked intelligence, or the witty comebacks. Perhaps it was her reliance on sarcasm or the casual
way she was always fine when in fact she wasn’t.

Claire was someone I spent time trying to figure out. I talked to her nightly because I wanted to
know every facet of her. Anything she told me, I made a mental note about it to review later and
possibly question her more on the topic.

While anxious wasn’t a word most would associate with her, talking to people with special notice
to strangers, Claire was always anxious. She worried endlessly over how her words would be
perceived, if the people she was talking to actually liked her or were pretending to, and found
herself more comfortable having a conversation one on one with a person.

It was one of the reasons, she preferred to dish out orders instead of talk to the people under her
charge. She didn’t want them to sense the weakness inside of her.

She built walls around her heart to keep people out. Somewhere along the way, she’d lost the key
to her gate and was trapped inside without anyone there until a dashing, young man came to save
the beautiful, fair maiden from her own heart.

Her head ruled triumphant and was the ultimate authority she trusted as her feelings often betrayed
her.

“Alright Jamie, I think it really is time, otherwise I wouldn’t want you to ever leave.”

A part of me wish I didn’t want to do what was right. I would stay with her and wake up with her
by my side. It was when I caught glimpses of the real her. Her defenses were down when she
slept and first thing in the morning when she woke. She was the girl I fell in love with, not the
exact same, but I saw the pieces of her she tried to hide escape.

“Good night Mo Nighean Donn,” her lips curved in the glow of the television.

I was tempted once again to steal a kiss from her. In the end, she made the decision and closed the
distance between us.

I opened the door prepared to take my leave when her hand grasped mine and she wove our
fingers tightly together, tugging me back into her body. Her eyes peered up at me and I fell into
the warmth of them.

I wondered what it was that was different between us.

It hit me. Though the passion was still there, there was a sense of newness to it all. I remembered
what it felt like when I first kissed her. We were tentative in the beginning until I applied a little
more pressure and she responded eagerly.

Her mouth opened up to mine and we explored. We figured out what one another liked and what
felt good.

Hope blossomed inside of me. It wasn’t our intention to recover what was lost, but start something
entirely new. We weren’t the same two people we were and I think we knew we couldn’t start our
relationship as if we hadn’t stopped.

Every touch was calculated because we were still learning and becoming comfortable in one
another’s presence. The trust we once had in leaps and bounds was slowly refilling its’ tanks.

“Stay,” she whispered.
I swallowed nervously, unsure if it was what she truly wanted. We were both running on fumes and our minds weren’t working clearly.

I listened to the sound of our joint breathing. The silence was comforting in a way and provided me the opportunity to try and gather my thoughts. Did I want to move forward? “I dinna have any clothes.” I finally told her and could’ve smacked my head.

She ducked her head. “I still have some things of yours.” Her voice was pitched low. If I asked her why she kept anything, she would refuse to answer to save herself the embarrassment.

I supposed my silence was telling as she tugged me along with her up the stairs and down the hall to her room. Her door was the last door on the right. It was a plain door, nothing to say she specifically lived in it.

She opened the doors and flipped on the light switch. I blinked quickly as the room flooded with light.

Her room was painted a cream color. Instead of wooden floors, she had white carpeting. I was slightly surprised. “I had the carpet installed when I bought the house. There were some other remodels we did after we closed on the property. I hired painters and wanted carpet.”

“For yer cold feet?” I smirked at her shocked face.

I’d known the woman for almost twenty years, and she hated cold floors, particularly in the morning when she first woke up. Her feet were already ice cold. She hated the total shock to her system. Sometimes I used to find her travelling around the house with a hoodie, thick sweatpants, fuzzy socks, and a blanket wrapped around her because she thought it was freezing once she left the comfort of the bed.

She rolled her eyes and muttered “whatever.” She went about her business as she gathered her pajamas. I watched as she entered her bathroom and began washing her face. In the past, she never had such an intensive skincare routine. Then again, she didn’t wear make-up. There were all these differences I had to learn about her.

I couldn’t expect her to be the same twenty seven year old woman she was. She changed in unexpected, but not unappreciated ways.

New layers of Claire unfold like a flower for me with each passing minute in her company. There was something calming about watching her go about her nightly routine.

After she removed the make-up, she began to cleanse her face. I noticed how her cheeks heated up and attributed it to her feeling my eyes on her.

It was unlikely she was accustomed to performing in front of an audience as attentive as me.

“Ye’re beautiful,” I told her, honesty flooding my entire system.

It was incredible how knowing she was carrying my child for the fourth time made me love her even more. The fact she was willing to have my children made her seem far more beautiful. It wasn’t strictly about her outside appearance either. It was about her soul. She chose to become a doctor to help patients after her father died because she couldn’t imagine not saving lives. It had nothing to do with the money, but solely related to her need to help people.

While I wasn’t here as she took the final steps to become a doctor, I knew it cut deep when a patient died. For her, their physical suffering became hers. She kept her stoic façade, while maintaining a professional, soothing manner for her patients. She was a mother after all and
wouldn’t allow anyone to be unnecessary fearful of what was to come.

I stared at her as the layers of Dr. Claire Fraser were removed and she simply became my Claire again.

She moisturized, brushed her teeth, used the toilet, and then pulled her loose hair up into a bun. The straight look was growing on me. I adored her curls, but change didn’t have to be a negative thing. I could still love her curls and like her current hairstyle.

I nosed through her room as she continued her bathroom stuff. She had a silver vanity with a few expensive perfume bottles placed delicately on top. There was a cup full of make-up brushes. If I opened the drawer, I was sure to find where she stored her make-up.

In the corner, she had a small, cream colored chaise. A light, blue plush pillow sat atop. Next to the chair was a small table with a crystal vase full of blue flowers. A medical journal was next to the vase.

Along the walls were more photographs of Claire and the girls. I stopped at one photo in particular. It was the two of us at my seventeenth birthday party. She surprised me with an afternoon on a boat with friends and family. The day turned out to be surprisingly warm, and Claire was never more than inches from my arms.

Someone captured a picture of two us as we looked over the railing at the world around us. Claire was wrapped in my arms, her head leaned back onto my shoulder. My lips brushed the side of her head. We looked peaceful.

I moved on from the photo, not wanting to linger too much, lest I draw her attention. In the opposite corner of her chaise, she had a light colored wardrobe. It was enormous by any means, but she could store a fair bit in it. It was more than likely full of her casual clothes. Her closet was the place where she’d store her dress pants, blouses, and her collection of shoes. She wasn’t big into shopping, but she did like to have a nice appearance.

There were even some artsy photos on the walls of beaches, lighthouses, unfamiliar cities, and even one of the Scottish highlands.

She had four windows, with long, cream drapes. They were wide open, but her windows opened up to the backyard. The trees lined along the property prevented the next house over from seeing into her room.

The bed was queen size like all the others in the house. She had one of those headboards made out of material. It was an off white, not quite cream. Her comforter was white with several decorative placed carefully on top. A tannish bed skirt prevented me from seeing what was under the bed. A matching blanket was draped across a corner of the bed.

On both sides of the bed were two light wooded nightstands. The lamps were attached to the wall, sort of like in a hotel. The nightstand on her side of the bed had a stack of papers, some bills, and another vase of yellow flowers.

Above the bed was a blown up picture of Isla and Brianna when they were little more than toddlers. Isla was no older than five, making her sister three. Their faces were cherubic with tiny teeth on display for the camera. Their hair was perfectly coiffed with curls adorning their faces. The photo was in black and white.

Every inch of the house Claire bore for our children.

After she emerged from the bathroom, she was dressed in a long Henley shirt and black leggings.
Her face was drawn and dark circles framed her eyes. I pulled back the comforter for her, and she slid into the warm folds.

“Thank you,” her voice barely more than a sleepy murmur. Her eyes fell shut, her breathing slowed, and soon I heard puffs of air escaping as she adorably snored. She’d deny it if I told her, but I found it endearing.

As though sensing my presence beside her, she shifted herself over until she was curled up on my chest.

I smiled into her hair and kiss her forehead, soaking in the extra warmth of her body. If there was a Claire, I preferred it was the one that sought me out in the night, not for sex, but for mere comfort as she slept.

CPOV

I pushed, my body tired. I wanted to give up.

Nothing went to plan and I was in agony. Everything ached as tears flowed freely down my face.

Faces covered with surgical masks stood over me as they argued. I couldn’t hear their words as they blurred together. I was alone.

I screamed in pain. “The baby is in distress.” One of the doctor’s voices drifted over to me. The words sounded distant. “We well have to perform a C-section.”

Faster than I knew, a scalpel was cutting me open. Blood splattered everywhere. I was gushing it. “We’ve got a bleeder.” They began working quicker, and I felt the tugging.

Then they pulled out something grey. “It’s dead.”

I screamed.

“Sassenach,” a voiced called to me. “Please wake, it’s a dream.”

Slowly, my eyes fluttered open to the worried blue eyes of Jamie. Even in the dark, the color was piercing. It searched the depths of my own, searching for something. He was attempting to discover if I was alright after my nightmare.

I shivered suddenly cold as the memory of my dream washed over me. I clung tightly to Jamie as the tears made their way down my cheeks and onto his soft t-shirt. I couldn’t contain my emotions any longer.

His hands ran down the length of my back, and I responded to his gentle touch. My body relaxed as my heart slowly found its’ steady pace again. “Do ye wanna talk about it?”

I shook my head. I wanted to forget the whole thing happened in the first place. Any psych major could tell me what my dream meant. I was terrified I would lose the child growing inside of me after what happened with Gabriel. A part of me was still traumatized from the events preceding the birth and directly following it.

I feared I would be alone once again. It wasn’t healthy. I just wasn’t prepared to discuss it yet. I didn’t want to hurt him, and I was scared my words would.

“Shh…”
At first he began to hum a distinctly Scottish tune when his voice took over.

_Sing me a song of a lad that is gone,_
_Say, could that lad be I?_
_Merry of soul, he sailed on a day_
_Over the sea to Skye_

_Mull was astern, Rum was on port,_
_Eigg on the starboard bow._
_Glory of youth glowed in his soul,_
_Where is that glory now?_

_Give me again all that was there,_
_Give me the sun that shone._
_Give me the eyes, give me the soul,_
_Give me the lad that's gone._

_Billow and breeze, islands and seas,_
_Mountains of rain and sun;_
_All that was good, all that was fair,_
_All that was me is gone._

I loved when he sang to me or the girls. While it wasn’t polished or perfect, it was Jamie, which made it perfect. He didn’t strive for perfect, but wanted to offer relief to those he loved. He wanted to console me and offer refuge from my dreams.

“I love you,” sleep coated my voice. I was falling back under thanks to the intoxication of his voice.

His lips were warm and tender on my head. “I love ye Sorcha, ye’ll always be my light in the dark.”

Funnily enough, he was my light in the dark. Whenever I was afraid, which happened more times than I’d care to admit, he was there to push the darkness back as it crept closer to me. “Rest Claire.”

I slept content for the first time since we parted in Scotland. Somehow during the night our positions shifted. Jamie’s body curled around mine as his arms looped around my waist. His lips were pressed to my neck, and I felt the warmth of his breath against my skin. It tickled slightly, but I enjoyed the closeness of it.

The moment couldn’t last forever. The day was to start soon as the sun began its’ ascent into the sky. I silenced my alarm before it woke Jamie and slid myself out of his arms.

The girls weren’t quite adept at making their own breakfast aside from oatmeal, cereal, and pop tarts. The first week I usually put forth more of an effort to make breakfast to ease the transition back to school and to coax them into waking up a little more before I sent them off for the day. Generally, I made breakfast for them on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays.

Sundays we went out to brunch after mass. The rest of the week, it was up to the girls to decide what they wanted to eat for their breakfast. Some days, they simply chose to grab a granola bar, some sort of fruit, and filled a glass with almond milk. Occasionally, we ran late enough where they only had time to grab the granola bar and eat on the way to school.

The further into the school year we got, the more likely the last scenario was to occur. Sports
dominated their schedules and homework consumed the night. The morning was a struggle to get them out of their beds. I haven’t hesitated in the past to dump water on them when they refused to get out. Wet sheets and hair made for grumpy, unpleasant children, but I had no choice as they knew school came before anything else in their lives.

I kissed Jamie’s hands when I freed myself from his grasp. A frown formed on his lips as his arms blindly searched for me. I looked down at him, my heart bursting to return to him. I’d given almost everything I had to this man, but managed to recapture pieces of the heart I’d given in my youth.

I had no singular regrets about the past because they led me to this moment. I couldn’t regret my daughters or the child I was carrying.

I grabbed my housecoat and made my way downstairs after I relieved myself. So far, I hadn’t had a bout of morning sickness since waking up, which was a relief. The vomiting I could live without.

In the kitchen, I pondered over my options for breakfast before deciding on French toast and bacon. I didn’t eat bacon, but the girls preferred it over turkey.

I searched the cupboards for ingredients. I double checked I had milk, cinnamon, eggs, and vanilla. I checked the expiration on the milk, eggs, and bread. Then I began mixing up ingredients and turning on the stove.

I soaked my bread and began frying. I cooked the bacon in the oven.

Isla came into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes and yawning widely. My lips twitched as I remembered the sleepy faces she made as an infant. Her knot had fallen to the wayside and strands fell loose during her sleep. “Good morning love, did you make it up to your room sometime last night?”

She nodded tiredly as she took her seat at the table. Her head fell onto her arms as her eyes shut. I shook my head. The first week was always the hardest as I tried to get them back into the routine of waking up. The week before they went back, I made them start getting up earlier to make the transition easier. Suffice to say the girls weren’t exactly morning people.

Bree made her way five minutes later looking just as sleepy. Her hair was mess of knots and angry furls. I dread running a brush through it later because if I left it to her, her hair would never get done. She hated brushing it because she claimed it always hurt, and used to scream bloody murder if I came within five feet of her with a brush.

She sat across from her sister who was sleeping and her head thudded into the table. The food was nearly done so I let them rest their little heads a bit longer.

Six thirty was always when we sat down for breakfast together unless I had a late shift. Then the girls made themselves cereal. We usually ate in about fifteen to twenty minutes and then got ready for our days. This year Isla was in a carpool as my mother was busier these days. On certain days, Bree would be picked up by a friend and her mother, or I would take her. It all varied depending on my work schedule, which I let the other mother know ahead of time because I took both girls to work.

“Alright girls, budge up, time to eat,” their eyes popped open just over the crease of their arms. Two glares were directed me, but they eventually sat themselves up as I brought the food and plates to the table. Orange juice and milk were placed in pitchers on the table for them to decide amongst themselves what they wanted. I also placed the powdered sugar and syrup for them.
Jamie walked into the kitchen and the girls halted their movements as they tracked him with their sleep dazed eyes. Bree blinked a few times to assure herself it was actually her dad in the kitchen before deciding she was too hungry.

Jamie took a seat next to Isla. Her eyes darted to him before focusing on her food. I placed a bowl of cut up strawberries on the table, hoping they would take the hint.

Breakfast was mostly a silent affair this early into the school year. Later though, the girls talked about their schedules or dreams, or anything big coming up at school. “So lasses, are ye ready for school?”

I glared at him and shook my head, but he didn’t seem to grasp the hint I was throwing his way.

Isla finished chewing and looked at her dad. “Too early.” She told him then continued eating.

Jamie was taken aback by her less than sociable behavior. The girls weren’t friendly this early. I’d learned the hard way when they were both finally in school, and I nearly got a finger bitten off when I tried to wipe Bree’s face.

The girls honestly hadn’t noticed I placed down an extra setting, but then they rarely noticed anything this early. By the end of breakfast with a little food in their system, they were a bit more awake and ready to start their days. Bree collected the dishes and took them to the sink. Isla wiped down their spots at the table and then they went upstairs to get ready for the day.

“I was trying to warn you about talking to them. They’re like rabid little beasts this early. Neither of them wants to chat. Later in the school year once they’ve adjust, you’ll find them be quite a bit more sociable. Don’t take it personal,” I told him as I began cleaning breakfast.

We worked alongside one another, cleaning the mess. He scrubbed while I dried, and it was nice to have a partner. “Ye ken, ye’ve done a wonderful job with them,” he handed me a dish.

I avoided eye contact as my cheeks flushed. It was strange hearing him compliment me on our children. “I’ve tried my best.” It was a bit self-deprecating, but it had been hard work. There were a lot of tears shared between the three of us out of sheer frustration with one another.

He stopped his movements and turned towards me. His wet hands dripped soapy water onto my kitchen floor, but I ignored that as he stared me in the eyes. “I meant it. They’re such amazing, intelligent, beautiful little girls and that comes from you. They are polite.” He cracked a smile. “Most of the time,” a nervous laughter bubbled out of me at his attempt at a joke. “Ye’re a good mother, and don’t ever forget that because I know they don’t.”

I pecked him on the lips. I didn’t want to attempt anything more than that with the possibility of the girls walking in on us. It was too soon for them to get their hopes up about that sort of thing, and I didn’t want to confuse them either. Jamie and I couldn’t even define ourselves, so I imagined we would struggle trying to explain it to our little girls.

“Thank you,” I told him quietly as we finished our tasks.

The girls came back down, dressed for the school day. Bree had on her dress with the pressed white shirt. She had three of them. In the beginning, she used Isla’s old ones, but at some point she became taller than Isla ever was when she attended the school and the dresses became too short to be accepted for dress code.

Bree’s hair was brushed, probably the influence of her sister. She wore her hairband from yesterday.
Isla wore a red, button down flare dress with a ruffled sleeve. To complete the look, she wore a faded jean jacket and black converse. She tided up her top knot and pulled strands down strategically.

“Teeth brushed?” They nodded. “Beds made?” Isla nodded and Bree half nodded, which alerted me to her lying. I pointed to the hall and she went back upstairs to make her bed, muttering angrily along the way.

“I filled out all the back to school forms, they’re in your backpacks.”

Isla nodded her head and crossed the kitchen to hug me. “Thanks mom,” her voice filled with appreciate.

“No texting in school,” I told her.

I caught the rolling of her eyes as she extricated herself from me. “Mom,” she groaned in dismay, her shoulders rose ready for an argument.

Jamie watched the interaction with a wistful look in his cerulean eyes. “Isla, I will confiscate it before the school has a chance to. I’m entrusting you with the responsibility. That’s the end of that particular argument.”

I heard her huff as she turned her back, but I merely waved her off and ignored her behavior. With her and Bree, I picked my battles because some simply weren’t worth the aggravation.

Bree trotted back into the kitchen, her spirits cheerful again. “Morning daddy,” she acknowledged his presence.

I cupped her face, her cheeks still a bit chubby from youth. “Daddy is going to take you to school today.” She bobbed her head happily.

Isla grabbed her water bottle from the fridge, a granola bar, and a bag of grapes. She then grabbed her lunch box last and an ice pack from the freezer. “Hey dad,” she said as she passed him. Jamie patted her shoulder as she walked by, knowing ruffling her hair would end in disaster.

Bree retrieved her things from the fridge as well. Her lunchbox sat waiting for her, and she grabbed her water bottle as well. Instead of grabbing a granola bar, she snatched a thing of fruit snacks and animal crackers.

Isla was out the door with her backpack. “I love you,” I called to her as she climbed into the van. A bunch of girls called out a greeting to me and I shook my head in amusement.

Bree had a little longer until she and Jamie had to leave. She decided to have her own version of the Spanish inquisition with her father. She was questioning him. “Did you sleep in mommy’s room?”

“Yes,” I heard the blush in his voice.

She nodded her head thoughtfully with pursed lips. “I see,” she said. “You only cuddled right?”

“Bree!” I called sharply.

She turned toward me with wide, innocent eyes and a “mama.”

I kissed her head and ruffled the curls a bit. “There are some things that are private. That is one of
them. Understand?” I grabbed her chin to force her to look at me.

“Yes,” she agreed.

“Go put your lunch in your bag. Don’t forget nana is picking you up today.”

She stuffed the lunchbox into her backpack, and I heard the crinkling of papers. I smiled fondly because that was my Bree. “Alright come here love bug,” she came willingly to my arms.

Jamie had gone up to get changed. I told him where he could find some of his clothes. “I love you so much. I hope you had a wonderful first day.”

“Fourth grade is awesome. We have recess with the fifth graders. There was a huge game of tag we played yesterday. Apparently it’s a tradition, and the person who was last it, is still it today at recess. My teacher is also super cool and nice.”

I ran my fingers through her hair. “You be good for your dad on the way to school. No more questioning him, just talk to him about normal things.” At my pointed look, she acquiesced. “Have a good day darling Bree, I’ll be home around six tonight. Maybe we will order out tonight.”

Bree squealed loudly as she threw her backpack on. “Okay mama, I’ll hold you to it.”

Jamie came down the stairs and I laughed as he nearly stumbled when she grabbed him by the arm to drag him out the house.

We could do this. We could be a family. I hoped.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all again for the kind thoughts and all the compliments. I can hardly believe sometimes how much you guys love the story.
Over My Head

CPOV

Jamie arrived back at the house thirty-five minutes after leaving to drop Bree off for school. I read the tiredness in his face, but there was such joy in his eyes after having the privilege to do something as mundane as take his child to school. He’d never had an opportunity to do it before because even Isla wasn’t old enough to attend pre-school when he moved to Scotland.

I walked into his arms without hesitation and soaked in the warmth of his presence. I couldn’t explain the feelings flowing through me, but I never wanted them to stop.

There were things I forgot in the last nine years without him. We’d thrown away so much with our sheer stubbornness and frustration.

He’d always been the best remedy for me on days when I simply needed a hug after a long day at school. “How did drop off go?”

“The lass talked the entire ride. I never had her talk to me so much, and I spent a month with her.”

I giggled into his shirt. It smelled more like me than him after all these years. In the beginning when I could still smell him on it, the nights when I felt particularly lonely, I curled up with a piece of clothing he left behind and cried into the material, wishing more than anything it was him instead.

Those were my weaker moments, but the moments filled with the most honesty. I was willing to admit to myself how much I missed and wanted him, how I’d made a lot of mistakes, and the biggest was telling him to go and letting him actually leave.

“Our girl is quite the chatterbox. You’ll have to slow her down because she can getting going if you allow her to. She enjoys speech, and already has desires to join the debate club when she’s older. She loves an argument so be careful about her.” I was trying to give him as much warning in advance about her.

Bree was a shark and she was good at sniffing people out. She had a counter attack prepared for any argument, and I wasn’t sure how she had all of that stored in the brain of hers. She did exceedingly well in language arts. Her ability to manipulate the English language benefitted her quite nicely and was a weapon to her when things didn’t go in her desired direction. I’ll admit she took after me with that trait.

“So make sure you’re prepared to argue your case back if she starts something with you because she’s voracious and possesses an expansive vocabulary.” I felt his lips in my hair as his body shook with laughter.

“Ye make her sound like a lioness on the hunt. Bloody determined.”

Oh, he had no idea about his darling daughters, perhaps it was best to allow him to learn the hard way that they weren’t always sweet as pie. They put on their act for their daddy, but one of these days, he was going to annoy them to the point where they catch an attitude with him. He won’t respond positively then, but I’ll just let it happen.
Daddy’s little princesses weren’t as sweet as their saccharine faces.

I burrowed my head in deeper to his chest to savor the moment. “How about we move to the couch?” I nodded and allowed him to navigate me into the sitting room.

I wound up on his lap, not that I minded in the slightest. I wouldn’t deny myself anymore what I truly wanted.

We sat there quietly, me in his embrace and enjoyed the moment for what it was. Things were going to change soon enough as we embarked on this journey together. “So tell me what to expect with the bairn?”

“Hmm…?” I wasn’t sure as to what he was referring.

He kissed me head again. These little interactions caused my heart to flutter as silly and school girlish as it sounded. “Well, ye had a rough pregnancy last time resulting in the loss of our child, and then Isla’s pregnancy wasna easy either. Have ye talked to yer doctor yet about scans?”

It dawned on me what he was asking. “I went to see her about two weeks ago to confirm the pregnancy. I have an appointment on Monday.” He sighed against my back alerting me to his problem. “You’re welcome to come. I actually forgot about it until you brought up stuff about the baby. More than likely it’ll be a transvaginal scan, possibly transabdominal, it depends on which one she prefers so early into the pregnancy.” I managed a small, comforting smile. “My doctor does want to have me come in more frequently this time around. Things were so easy with Bree that we didn’t have any need to worry before, but now I’m also at advanced maternal age.” I exhaled slowly with those words. I wasn’t as young as I was when I had Isla and Bree.

“Is that a bad thing?” Jamie wasn’t knowledgeable in the medical area. He relied heavily upon my training to explain to him certain things.

I bit my lip, not wanting to worry him. “It depends on the person. It’s not as if because I’m almost thirty-five that I’m suddenly at risk for complications. It’s more of a general term for women than anything. Since I am healthy with my diet and exercise, and I’ve been screened in the past. With Isla, the main reason I gave birth so early was because of stress. With Gabriel, I developed pre-eclampsia and suffered a full abruption, meaning his air supply got cut off. It can happen to anyone, although the chances increase the older you are. I’ve already discussed with my ob having a CVS done.” I sensed his puzzlement over the foreign term. “It’s essentially a test that determines the chromosomes to know if the baby is genetically healthy, meaning no down syndrome or other chromosomal issues.”

I took my pre-natal vitamins with folic acid as my doctor prescribed and tried to keep the stress level down. I hadn’t smoked a fag since my days as an English punk, which were prior to meeting Jamie. All of my vaccinations were up to date, and my doctor wasn’t worried so I took all of my cues from her.

“Dr. Roberts isn’t concerned right now about anything pertaining to the baby. She’s told me to keep myself in a low stress environment. Work is fine for the moment, but she won’t hesitate to recommend I take off from work if the pregnancy gets difficult. “

His arms tightened around my torso. He was offering me comfort, which I thought to be slightly humorous as I was trying to do the same for him. “We are going to confirm the heartbeat tomorrow and measure the gestational age because even though we know when we had relations, sperm can survive for several days. Pregnancy is usually counted from the first of the last period. She’ll also take some measurements of the bay.”
I played with his long fingers. “What time is it?” I asked him because although time passed differently in his presence, I know it still flowed regularly.

“It’s almost ten,” and I felt a deep breath exhale from me as I removed myself from him.

I had to go to work. As it was, I would end up a few minutes late.

He stood up and I took a step back to have some sense of space. I was accustomed to his large frame, and it was different compared to how it was in our youth. He was far lankier with toned muscles from sports, not the larger muscles he currently sported in his arms.

He could probably pick me up easily without any preparation.

“Do ye want me to leave?”

I bit my lip and chewed thoughtfully on my lip. It wasn’t I didn’t trust him in my house, but all of this was going to take some time. He’d been gone for so long, and I wasn’t sure if I was prepared to allow him all the way back into my life just yet.

I was terrified one day I’d find him gone. It wasn’t a healthy mentality or fair to him, but it scared me to know how easily I would fracture if he were to disappear. I was already coming to depend on him to be there. What if he decided it was all too much?

In a way, I practically forced his hand. He had no prior warning to my pregnancy and it was just another issue to deal with. I’d raised my kids on my own with a little assistance from him, and it was going to be difficult to parent them if he didn’t agree with my decisions. We had our own established system. Could he meld into that? Would he agree with my decisions?

These were all things we hadn’t discussed, but they were required conversations for the future. What were we? Would we get married again? Move in together?

How would it work once the baby was born? I was stressed thinking about it. I decided to clear my mind with a few simple deep breaths. “Would you mind terribly if I said yes?”

I think he read the indecision and conflict in my eyes because he smiled albeit a little disappointed, but he kissed my cheek and let himself out. I wanted to sink into the comfort of my couch cushions, but there was no time.

Upon my arrival at the hospital, I was thrust into my first surgery of the day. I allowed my mound to become occupied with the routine of a coronary artery bypass. After surgery, I had several charts to catch up on and a few consults to make. One of my patients was on the transplant list. It could be any moment when we received the call from UNOS about a heart. She had a congenital heart disease that she was born with.

We’d tried treating her a variety of ways, prior to her ending up on the wait list. She was one of my first patients when I was doing my residency. At the time, she was nine years old. I hadn’t decided on a specialty until her.

I mustered a grin for her as I entered the hospital room. She was diagnosed as an infant and it worsened as she got older. Countless surgeries were thought to correct it, and we tried medication.

Presently she was seventeen years old and barely managed to live a life. “Hello Mally,” I greeted her.

I read her chart, even though I was already familiar with everything documented. “Hi Dr. Fraser,” her face was pale and a bit gaunt.
Her eyes were greener than usual and stood out against her pallor. Her blonde hair was dull in color as she rarely left the hospital anymore. It was simply too risky to allow her out with her lungs in poor condition and her heart barely functioning. “How’s my favorite patient?” I took a seat on the edge of the bed.

She attempted to push herself up into a sitting position, but it was too much for her in her weakened condition. I assisted her until she was comfortable. “I’m okay. A little tired today, but I keep praying for a miracle.”

I was praying for one as well. Her condition was worsening with each day, and I wasn’t sure I would ever fully get over her death. She was my responsibility and I had grown close to her and her family.

I stroked her hair and tried to maintain a positive attitude. “What’s brought you by today?”

“Well I thought I would check in on you for a little while. I have some surgeries I have to assist with later as my residents are going to take the lead.” It was a nerve wracking experience when they began to perform their surgeries solo, and I was there more for assistance if it was needed otherwise I merely observed.

It was terrifying, but I had to trust I trained them properly and they wouldn’t screw up.

She laughed and pushed away my hand. “I’m always the same. I do my home school stuff. I text my friends. I mope over the fact my boyfriend broke up with me because he can’t handle having a girlfriend in the hospital.” She shrugged self-deprecatingly and attempted to smile it away.

I saw through her act immediately because I used to be exactly like her, or perhaps still was.

“What sign are you?”

I arched a brow at her. She rolled her eyes and explained. “I’ve been fascinated with horoscopes and astrology. Zodiac signs are so cool because people often display many of the characteristics of their signs. I mean sometimes it can be super vague, but like totally accurate. So?”

“I’m a Libra.”

She scrolled through some app on her phone before glancing up and beaming at me. “I can totally see you as this. Libras are cooperative and diplomatic. I’ve seen how you handled crises with your residents. Fair minded, gracious, and social are perfect words. I’ve seen you at church and you talk to everyone.” She also attended the same church, which made the world incredibly small. “Indecisive,” described me to a tee. It was hard to make decisions, especially once I analyzed all of the potential outcomes. “Avoids confrontations, I’ve sort of heard through the gossipy nurses that you recently broke up with Peter. I’m sorry.” She apologized immediately, realizing it was an invasion of my privacy and those nurses lacked class and respect.

“I heard you just sort of ended it without giving any reasons.”

I pushed her phone down and out of view for the moment. “One day you’ll realize how life throws all of these people at you, and while on paper they seem perfect, it’s the imperfect you want. You want the person you shouldn’t want and who seems the least compatible.” In all honesty, we didn’t even have compatible signs, and Peter and I did.

“So it’s true? You haven’t really come by since I was re-admitted.” She had a bit of a break in August from hospital life. “Why?”
Everyone saw the same perfection in him I did, and pushed me towards him because he was magnificent and generous. Lately, he wasn’t any of those things towards me, not that I could particularly blame him for his hurt feelings. I wish he’d stop pushing me for an answer and hoped he learned to accept what I gave him and finally move on from me. My pregnancy was going to hurt him immensely, and I expected at some point he would confront me about the baby. I was dreading when I no longer could hide the bump behind my scrubs or work clothes.

“It’s like I said we just weren’t right. I don’t if you’ve experienced this yet in your life, but when you fall truly in love, there’s since of weightlessness. The world isn’t as terrifying or big because you’re not alone anymore. There’s someone by your side to take away half of the burden. You discover you’ve given away your whole heart without you even noticing, but strangely enough it’s okay because you don’t want it back. You gave it freely and without hesitation, which is honestly the preferable way.”

Her face was solemn, thoughtful, and so many other emotions mixed in. “I don’t think I was in love with Jason, but I cared for him a lot. Maybe it could’ve turned to love if we had more time to spend together, but I’m always at the hospital.”

“Some day you won’t be here anymore and you’ll find the right person.”

“Have?”

“Hmmm…?”

“Have you found the right person?” She asked without a hint of hesitation. “I mean you described all these feelings and I’m a bit a jealous.”

I stared at the young girl who was not quite a child any longer. Mally Grace had grown into such a beautiful young woman. “Yes,” I wanted honesty between us because I promised her to never lie to her.

She tilted her head to the side with curiosity burning brightly in her green orbs. “Who is her? Are you together? When did you meet? Please, I don’t get a lot of people to talk to every day. You gotta tell me something. I’m dying here.”

I frowned at her misplaced humor. “Sorry,” she muttered apologetically, knowing what upset me. “But please can you tell me something. Is he Bree and Isla’s dad?”

I settled in and told her bits and pieces of my shared history with Jamie, at least the minor parts before things became entirely too messy. “You know that ties into the whole avoids confrontation thing. Libras love to keep the peace, and for you a divorce was the way to keep peace and avoid a huge, messy blow up.”

Confrontations were never my strong suit, and she was right. I tended to go in the other direction if I knew I was headed directly for a disaster. I wanted things to be easy, which was why I tried for so long to maintain a happy relationship until I simply couldn’t anymore. I flipped out on Jamie when I could no longer take it anymore.

“I’m not saying it’s like really true or anything like that, but I think signs help us figure out the bigger questions about ourselves. I like the idea of being born under a specific sign and being influenced by all these cosmic events. Not everyone buys into that sort of thing, but I think it’s cool.” She shrugged a shoulder as she unlocked her phone when it vibrated. “So where’s Jamie now?”

“Well he’s actually here in Boston.”
Her eyebrows quickly shot up and her eyes widened dramatically. I chuckled at her melodramatic behavior. “Have you seen him?” I nodded. “Are you guys involved?”

“I don’t know what we are. Life as an adult is complicated besides now we are arriving in personal territory, which you know I prefer to keep quiet.”

She huffed and crossed her arms across her chest. “I hope he’s hot. I mean he’s a Scot, but they come in all kinds of forms. But I think you’ve got good taste.”

“Thanks,” I said unsure of what to say. It wasn’t the kind of thing I thought people could measure easily. “I’ll let you get some more rest because I know it’ll happen any day.”

Her eyes were half closed as she fought off sleep. The medicine we supplied her with generally made her drowsy and helped her fall asleep. She complained regularly about restless nights.

The remainder of my day passed in a haze and before I knew it, I was pulling into my driveway. Thursdays my mother picked the girls up from school and spent time with them at home until I arrived. She rarely stayed for dinner anymore and I suspected she was definitely seeing someone. She was perhaps hesitant to introduce us for fear we might run him off. While I missed my dad, I would never stop my mother from being in a relationship again. It was her life, and I didn’t want her to end up lonely.

“Oh, hello love,” she greeted me as soon as I entered the house. She wiped her hands on a hand towel and embraced me in her motherly hug. The world always felt right and whole when I was in her arms. All of my worried seemed to fade into nothingness at least while in this position.

I pulled back to find her fixing me with a stern look. I supposed the girls regaled her with tales about their father and his surprise appearance in Boston. They were quite chatty and their grandmother knew the way to their mouths was through their stomachs with a fresh batch of chocolate chip cookies.

“Those little rats,” I groaned, disappointed at having the chance stolen from me.

My mother never approved of my decision to divorce Jamie. She encouraged me from across the Atlantic to patch things up with him, but I was stubborn and set in my ways. “Come pickles, I’ve made some tea. Let’s talk. I’ve already ordered dinner, so that can’t be your excuse either.”

I followed her into the kitchen where the kettle was already situated on the table with two teacups ready to be filled.

She gestured for me to sit as she went about pouring our tea. Tea was the one thing I managed to regularly keep down and not regurgitate. It was a miracle in all honesty as everything with Isla made me sick. The same thing occurred in my first trimester with Gabriel.

“Alright, why don’t you tell your old mum what’s wrong?”

“How do you anything is wrong?” My tone turned defensive and I softened my features. My mother was only trying to help me with my never ending problems.

She reached across the trouble to take my hands into hers. Her thumbs ran soothingly over the backs of my hands. “How do you feel about him being back here? It’s alright if it upsets. As I’ve always told you in the past, you’re entitled to your feelings. While I prefer for you not to feel anything negative, it is an unrealistic expectation. So your only solution is to tell me the truth.”

She had me there, but I suspected it was her plan all along. I was reluctant to share things with her when I was younger, but she’d become quite the confidant, especially with my main ones across
the ocean. She was supportive and loving.

I began to tell her everything minus the bit about the baby. I was going to wait to inform anyone about that. I was taking precautions. I wanted to know the baby would be alright, and while there weren’t a hundred percent guarantees that everything would turn out all right at the end of the pregnancy or during the pregnancy in general, I still wanted confirmation that there wasn’t anything already wrong with the baby.

My mother wasn’t dumb, nor was she born yesterday. She was aware I was hiding something from her, but let it slide for the moment. She wouldn’t push unless she felt it necessary for me to open up to her.

“I don’t want to screw up mum,” I admitted to her, my eyes on my cooled tea. “We’ve done this game before and we got divorced.”

“Pickle, it’s the great thing about life. We can do things over and over a hundred times, but the result will always vary. You can’t go into this expecting it will fail. It’s not fair to you, Jamie, or my grandchildren. I would start by being honest with him about how you feel and really talk with him. Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to actually attend counseling together.”

I considered her advice. It was sound and made the most sense. We couldn’t expect it to be easy to merge two separate lives back into one after we’d done everything in our power to keep them divided.

“I’ve got to go, but I’ve already paid for the food. It’s on me tonight. Enjoy!” She kissed me head. “Think about what I told you,” she reminded me as she gathered up her belongings and went to say her goodbyes to the girls.

By the time she left, Bree’s favorite Chinese take out was being delivered. I had thought about inviting Jamie to dinner again, but I wanted to enjoy some time with my daughters because soon enough it wouldn’t be the three of us anymore. There were some big changes coming ahead for all of us, and we were going to have to learn how to adjust when they did. The changes were already in motion.

As I ate my fried rice, I thought a lot more about my mother’s suggestions. Not talking was definitely one of our biggest issues. We lacked the communication skills to have healthy conversations in the end of our marriage. Several friends recommended we try therapy, but I was adamant our relationship was simply over. Everything I’d witnessed and experienced colored my view of him and us.

Counseling didn’t sound like a bad idea now though.

Chapter End Notes

So what’s everyone's zodiac sign? Mine is the current one: Leo. Jamie will come back in the next chapter, but I’ve been neglecting Claire a bit. She’s got a lot to think through.
Well now I feel terrible. I've been going through a lot of stuff. More on that at the bottom, but I hope you guys enjoy. we are almost at the end. 15ish more chapters to go.
Also I don't know all that much about pregnancy aside from what I've seen on tv and read online, so you'll have to excuse me if anything is wrong. 
Thanks for telling me your signs. A lot of you are Libras which is funny because I only know one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I've waited a hundred years
But I'd wait a million more for you
Nothing prepared me for
What the privilege of being yours would do

JPOV

I was up early for a Saturday, which were usually the days I had a lie in. Today, however I had made a promise to a nine year old that I'd be at her game to support her.

The game was at the field she practiced at on Wednesday. I had spent the night at my own apartment on Thursday and Friday as I felt as if I were intruding a bit. Claire seemed to need her space, and to be quite honest I needed the time to gather my thoughts about everything she dropped on me.

To say the pregnancy was a complete shock would be quite the understatement. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but the more I thought about it, the more terrified I was about it.

It wasn’t the pregnancy bit that was scaring me and causing a mountain of anxiety, it was the thought of being a father again. With the last two, I unexpectedly had more of a hands off approach. I saw them at least 8 weeks out of the year with short visits in-between.

This time around I would be there from the complete start. There was no end as I would always be the father, and part of them would still need me.

Isla texted last night to remind me about the game and the location. She told me it would devastate her sister if I didn’t show. There was no chance of that happening again after finally having a permanent place in their lives again. I wanted to show them they could depend on me for anything and everything.

Dad,

Bree’s game is tomorrow. Don’t forget.
Love, I

She then sent another text with the remaining details. I set my alarm and pre-programmed my GPS so as not to get lost.

Claire and Isla were already at the field when I arrived. Claire chatted with one of the other soccer moms. Lots of smiles were exchanged and Claire laughed quite a bit.

Isla was on her phone, ignoring the attention a boy was paying to her. She rolled her eyes every time he tried to talk to her.

I was not prepared for her to grow up at all. She wasn’t even twelve yet, and boys were already starting to have feelings for her. Claire and I would be discussing the dating policy because there was simply no way she was allowed to have any sort of boyfriend before she was sixteen. I refused.

Claire wore a hoodie to support Bree’s team and a pair of jeans. She wore Nike’s. I admired her physique. As it was still so early, she barely had a slight curve to her stomach.

Isla wore black Under Armour leggings, the logo was hard to miss as I came closer. She wore a grey Under Armour fleece pullover. The girls seemed to have particular tastes about what they wore. When Bree pulled out clothes for practice a few days ago, most of hers were of the Nike variety.

I spotted Bree easily with her team as they did warm ups. Her bright hair stuck out quite vividly. Her hair was tied back into a basic ponytail.

She was in her team uniform and looked adorable. She had such a serious, concentrated expression upon her face and was ready for the game to begin. She broke for a minute to shoot me a smile and throw a wave in my direction.

Claire noticed me first and gestured me over. Her companion’s face was curious, but not entirely surprised by my appearance. “Jamie, this is Jenna Anderson. She’s the mom of one of Bree’s teammates. We’ve known them since Bree started football, and the girls have been on a team together since they were four.” She pointed out a blonde girl next to Bree. “That’s Remi. If you can find one, you’ll always find the other.”

I shook Jenna’s hand and shot her a friendly grin. “So you’re Scottish right?”

“Aye,” I answered.

“So I’m guessing you use football as well?” Claire rolled her eyes and nudged her friend. “Do you play?”

“I’m not very good. Bree tends to shoot a lot of goals.”

“She’s a striker. Luckily, they have her playing the position today.” It was strange to meet a woman who knew so much about my daughter.

I studied her as she watched the kids out on the field. She was more of a honey blonde with brown eyes and a smattering of freckles in the upper regions of her face. She wore no make-up. She had on a team hoodie as well and dark jeans. Next to her was a cooler. “Does your daughter go to school with Bree?”

“Oh yes, Remi and Bree have been going to school together since pre-school. It’s actually how they originally met. They got into a bit of a skirmish the first day, but then Remi stood up when a
boy tried to steal Bree’s soccer ball.” Her eyes focused on the team as they finished their final
warm ups. “We were late the first day of school.”

I was wondering why Bree hadn’t introduced her friend to me. “We usually take Bree to soccer
and drop her off at home afterwards, although on some weekends she comes home with us.”

This was probably the family Bree talked about when she said she often went with a friend’s
family to tournaments. If they had known her since she was a little bean at three, then Claire
must’ve trusted them to watch out for our girl.

Isla had yet to greet me as she was far too interested in what was going on in her phone. I plucked
the device right from her fingers. Her head lifted and I was treated to a steely, dark blue glare.
“Yer sister is about to play, and I would rather ye watch than play on yer phone.”

Her eyes turned to her mother. “Mooommm!!!!” She whined. I rubbed my ear at the pitch of her
voice. “Tell dad he can’t just take my phone away from me. This isn’t fair. Becca is having a crisis
right now.” I wondered what qualified as a crisis to an almost twelve year old.

Claire scowled disapprovingly at Isla. “Your father probably had a valid reason for taking away
your mobile. Readjust your attitude, or I’ll ground you from the phone.”

I knew I had stepped into something besides a simple phone obsession, and that there was
something far larger at play. Whatever Isla had done did not endear her to her mother, and was in
fact the reason she was currently in so much trouble.

She rolled her eyes and muttered an angry “whatever”.

Claire wore a murderous expression, but chose to ignore this aspect of Isla’s behavior. Isla crossed
her arms and angled her body away from us to watch the game.

I watched fascinated as the game began. Bree showed determination and passion for her sport, and
worked well with her teammates.

She managed to score two goals by the end of the game. The game ended in 2-1. The other team
was fairly good, and the players walked passed one another giving high fives. Bree murmured
words to each player as she made her rounds.

The coach talked with the team afterwards and they did a team chant. All the kids left smiling and
hugging one another as the coach gave them each a pat on the back before sending them on their
way to us. Bree ran straight for my arms with arms held out wide.

I scooped her up and swung around causing her to squeal loudly with an abundance of
enthusiasm. “I am so proud of ye.” She beamed at me. “Not just for scoring because it isna always
about making the points. Ye worked with yer team, and ye told the other members of the team
good job. That’s what a true player does. Ye’re growing into a fine lass Brianna.”

Her eyes had a glassy sheen as she looked up at me. As I set her down, I heard her sniffling. I
ruffled her messy hair and she shook me off as she went to her mom.

Claire kissed her fiery head and whispered something to her. Bree nodded her head and mumbled
something back to her mother. Claire released her and passed her onto her sister.

“Nice job squirt!” Isla playfully shoved her sister away from her.

It was funny and a bit ironic she called her sister squirt as there weren’t too many inches between
the lasses anymore. Bree was quickly gaining height on her sister.
Claire handed Bree a hoodie and a different pair of shoes. Then she reached into the cooler to bring out a water bottle, a bag of grapes, and a sandwich. Bree garbled her thanks to her mother through a full mouth as she dug into her food. I hid my chuckle as Claire chastised her for her manners.

Isla held out her hand, and I placed the phone back into her grasp. “I want ye to interact with the world and not just your phone. Friends are important, but so is family.”

She nodded, although I’m not sure of how much she actually absorbed. Her red head was already turned downwards at her phone as her fingers began flying across the screen. She made all sorts of weird faces each time her phone dinged.

“Just ignore it, she acts like she can’t be parted with it. I’ve learned to let it slide for the most part.” Claire whispered into my ear as I continued to watch our oldest. “If you’d like, I’m taking the girls out for ice cream to celebrate, although we get ice cream anyways, win or lose. Remi and Jenna will be joining as well, and a few of her other teammates.”

I debated internally. It was a crucial moment. I realized there wasn’t any decision to make. “Yes, I’ll come.” I was choosing to become an active member of the family, and that meant partaking in their traditions.

I obviously made the right choice as Claire’s eye lit up. “Great, you can just follow me when we leave. The kids usually eat some sort of snack before we head out for ice cream.”

Bree finished her entire sandwich, her grapes, and drank just about all of her water. She and Remi were talking and making a lot of excited gestures to one another. “I’m so happy. We won and the school barbecue is this week.” Their lips moved rapidly, I only caught snatches of their conversation. “-graded by the end of this week.”

“I think I did well… fingers crossed anyways. So that’s your dad?”

I turned and pretended to watch as other teams warmed up for their game. I didn’t want Bree to know I was listening on her conversation, but I was more than curious about what she would say.

“Yeah, he got in on the first day of school that wasn’t really the first day.” Claire later explained to me how both girls started school on a Wednesday but it was just an opening day. The kids went and dropped off their supplies, there were assemblies, and other bonding activities, but no actual learning took place.

There was a pause. “How do you feel about it?” Nine year olds were clearly quite perceptive and smarter than most people gave them credit for. “Like is it good?”

My eyes darted in her direction and I watched as she shrugged uncertainly. “I don’t know. It’s different I guess. I only saw him today, Wednesday and Thursday.” A frown tugged at her lips. “I’m used to him being far away, and I don’t know how to be with him here. Mommy and him are being really weird about stuff.”

“Are they dating?” Remi giggled a little.

Bree’s slanted eyes squinted and she wore a curious expression upon her angular face. “I don’t know. I saw them kiss, and he slept in her room.”

“I know how much you want them to get back together.”

Bree’s eyes lowered to the ground. I watched as a single tear dripped down her face, and I felt my
heart crack the slightest. I knew it had been Isla’s mission to get us back together all these years, but I never knew her sister felt the same way. She’d been less obvious about it, and hid her feelings on the matter. She was accustomed to the arrangement we had because she had never known any different. If she saw pictures of our family in the past, she didn’t know what had happened or how happy we once were. They were things she couldn’t actually remember. She had stories and that was it.

Remi hugged her friend. It was strange to see a kid taller than Bree after realizing how tall she was. Remi was at least four inches taller. Bree pulled back and wiped her face.

“Hey dad, mind if I ride with you?” Isla asked, coming up to my side.

“Ahhhh,” I jumped, surprised to find she had snuck up on me. She cackled, her eyes sparkled with mirth. I swatted at her and she laughed harder. It sounded like tiny shortles, which I’d be sure to mention to her friends and potential boyfriends in the future.

“God dad, you scare so easily. That’s probably why they say it’s wrong eavesdrop.” I whistled innocently, my eyes looking anywhere but at her. “We aren’t upset you’re here. Honest!” Her eyes were earnest and glittered with truth. “You’ve always been so far, and I guess we just don’t know what to expect. Are you going to start disciplining us like mom? Will you take us to school more often? Come to school events? We want you and mom together, but what does that mean?” I wrapped my arm around her shoulder as we began walking towards my car.

She gave me a lot of food for thought because it was one of those things we needed to discuss. Then there was the bit with the baby. We would eventually have to tell the girls, and there was no telling what sorts of reactions they might have to the news. They could be happy, angry, sad, or all of the above. It was new for all of us, but for so long the family was just the four of us even in our separate corners of the world.

Adding a new life to the equation would inevitably change the dynamic. The girls would have to adjust to a little brother or sister, and there was a sizeable age gap. Bree still enjoyed dolls now, but soon enough she would be onto more mature pursuits like her sister.

I squeezed her to my side. “I dinna ken. We havena really talked about it.” Her face scrunched as confusion blossomed in her eyes. The shape of her eyes was like her mother’s, but the color was Jenny’s. She was such a blend of our two families. “There’s so much we need to work on, and while part of it is how to get to a point where it’s all natural, we sort of have to take it slowly.”

She peered up at me with sage eyes. Sometimes I wondered if she was really eleven, or if she was two hundred. “Why?”

“Well, I don’t want to push you guys into anything. We made bad decisions before and it cost us our family and marriage. As humans, we have a tendency for selfish actions, and we always want to protect ourselves. Mommy and I weren’t in a good place to make good decisions and hurt each other a lot.”

I unlocked the door and slid into the front seat. I recalled the days where I buckled her carefully into her car seat, or when we placed her carrier onto its’ latch. Those days seemed so far ago.

“So you’re better now? Kind of like when you get older, you get smarter?”

“Yes, we needed time to mature because we weren’t then. We acted kind of childishly and refused to talk to one another about what matters.”

“Huh,” she said, and I couldn’t figure out the tone of voice she used. “Do you want to be
together? I mean I know you know how Brianna and I feel about it, but how do you feel about it? I don’t want you to do something because you think it’ll make us happy.”

My heart swelled with love and pride. I don’t know what I had done to help create such a selfless, thoughtful young lady. She was better than I truly deserved. She was proving to be a better human being at almost twelve than I had been for most of my life.

I ruffled her hair, giving it a messier appearance. It looked as if she hadn’t actually brushed it today. “How come your hair isn’t perfectly coifed?”

She gave me a disgruntled look as she ran her fingers through the long, auburn locks. “If you must know, mom wouldn’t let me take a shower this morning. She said it would’ve taken too long. Then she rushed us out the door, and I didn’t have time to grab my hairbrush. So it is what it is.” She glared at me, daring me to comment about it again.

I was starting to see what Claire meant about the little attitudes they occasionally displayed. While they certainly put on a different persona for me in the summer, it was clearly to see they didn’t always have cheery dispositions. Isla already showed hints of becoming a teenager with her moody, sullen like behavior.

They were showing more of who they were. While I didn’t like how they behave sometimes, I preferred the real versions of them instead of the fake ones. It allowed me to know they were feeling comfortable around me. They viewed me the same as their mother.

“Mom’s been super annoying and cries all the time.” Isla informed me as we left the parking lot. “Then she throws up, which is so gross. She said it’s food poisoning. The hospital should get better food, or it’s one of the restaurants mom is always trying around work.” She never delved into her feelings about her mother with me before as she kept the two separated for fear of hurting me.

Her eyes rolled often. I knew where she inherited it, not that I would ever tell Claire. “Then she like didn’t want to eat her favorite dinner last night. Mom loves Shepherd’s Pie, especially if grandma makes it. I guess being sick sucks.”

I didn’t like her using the word sucks, but I wasn’t sure there was much I could do to curb her. She had a mind of her own, and she was determined to do things her way. “All she does is write all secretive in her journal. Like if she sees us coming, she slaps it shut like I care about what she writes. It’s probably gross like what Donna wrote in her journal in Mamma Mia. No thanks,” her face pinched together as she made a yuck noise.

I knew Mamma Mia was a movie, but I never felt inclined to watch it. I wasn’t too sure my eleven year old should be watching it either after what she told me. “What exactly is it you think yer mother writes?”

Her eyebrows lifted carefully as she regarded me as some sort of simpleton. I felt two inches tall under her gaze. She was intimidating. “Oh come on dad, I’m not dumb. I know about sex and how babies are made.”

Not the kind of conversation I wanted to have, so I pointedly ignored her and turned up the radio.

She smirked from her seat and crossed her arms, knowing she won this particular round.

CPOV

My fingers tapped some unknown beat on my leg as I waited for someone to call me back.
Jamie still hadn’t arrived, and internally I was worried he wouldn’t show up. I wouldn’t blame him if he was still processing what I told him. I had only told him four days ago, and it was a lot to mentally assess.

Just as I was called, Jamie came rushing in with a weary expression, but the joy in his eyes was undeniable. I ignored his proffered hand as I was capable of still getting myself up at this point in the pregnancy. I already disliked the idea of relying on others in a few months to assist me in small tasks.

“Alright Claire, I’ll let you change,” Sarah informed me. She’d been working here for as long as I’ve been coming. “Then I’ll be back.”

I turned to Jamie with a raised brow. “Uh…” I gestured uncomfortably, he flushed when he caught my hint and excused himself.

While nudity in front of him didn’t exactly bother me, we were in a sort of limbo, and it wasn’t appropriate for me to change freely in front him without us having a discussion defining exactly what we were to one another outside of being parents.

It was all so confusing and more than anything gave me a migraine when I thought too much about it.

I’d worn a dress today and slid it over my head before changing into the gown. I slid out of my heels and sat on top of the examination table. “You can come back in Jamie,” he came back in with a shy smile. It reminded me of his boyish features, and my heart fluttered at the reminder.

“Sorry I was late,” he apologized, coming to sit at my side.

I shook my head absolving him of any misplaced guilt. While I was slightly irritated with him for his tardiness, I couldn’t hold it against him. My doctor had switched offices and he was unfamiliar with the new location, and he was still readjusting to the city and the time difference. It wasn’t something I needed to make a federal case about.

There were enough things between us without me ragging on him about the little stuff. Jamie took a seat by my side and his hand made its’ way into my own.

My lips tilted up a bit at the warm gesture.

Sarah knocked before entering. “Alright Claire, I’m going to draw some blood,” I winced as the needle pierced my skin. A wave of dizziness washed over me as it always did when I was pricked with a needle.

Jamie squeezed my hand tightly, knowing my aversion to them. “Sorry,” Sarah apologized as she tried to quickly finish. “There we go,” she removed the needle and placed a bandage on my arm. “Alright, now if you could get on the scale so I can weigh you,” I inched off the table and stepped onto the scale.

The numbers read 130. I had only gained around two pounds, but my weight fluctuated from week to week. Sarah marked down the information on my chart. “Okay looks good, Dr. Roberts will be in as soon as she finishes up with a patient.” She grabbed the vials of blood and then quickly left the room.

I took my place back on the table, and Jamie laced his fingers with mine.

Dr. Roberts entered the room with a smile on her face. The corners of her eyes crinkled a bit as she took in the sight of Jamie beside me. An eyebrow arched in my direction, and I knew she had
loads of questions for me. We’d become quite friendly over the last several years.

“Well hello Jamie,” she greeted him hesitantly. “It’s been quite sometime since we’ve all been here.” Jamie came to the scans with all of the kids, but the last one was eight years ago.

Jamie choked back a laugh. “It’s good to see ye as well.”

“Alright Claire, so it’s still early in the pregnancy, but from what you’ve said you should be about eight weeks pregnant. I’m going to do a transabdominal ultrasound. We will hear the heartbeat, I’ll take some measurements, and that will be that.”

When I came a couple of weeks before, we’d done a transvaginal ultrasound to confirm the pregnancy and that it was progressing normally.

Dr. Roberts applied the gel to my lower abdomen. She grabbed the probe and began moving it over my stomach to get a clear image of the fetus.

A whooshing noise came from the speakers, and tears burst forth from my eyes at the sound. It was marvelous and something I didn’t think I’d ever hear again.

“There’s your baby,” she directed our attention to the screen. “Your baby has a nice steady heartbeat at a hundred and fifty.” Jamie gave a watery smile as his hand stayed in mine. She wrote some things down on my chart as she took her measurements. While I wasn’t specialized in anything related to obstetrics, I’d done my rotation like anyone else. “You can see the head there,” she pointed to the our little baby’s round head.

“Thank you,” I told her through my tears.

She patted my hand and handed me a paper towel to clean myself. “Oh Claire, it’s not a problem. After the last one, I definitely want everything to go smoothly this go around. I’ve delivered two out of your three children alive, and I intend for this fourth to go well. So for now, don’t stress about anything. I want you to take it easy and let Jamie take care of you. I’m sure your girls will be willing to help as well. Just try to relax as much as possible.”

“I’ll try, but I love working.”

Dr. Roberts laughed. “I’m not recommending you take off just yet. If work helps keep you relaxed then fine. How’s your diet?” She went through the standard questions I already filled out in my questionnaire. “Are you experiencing morning sickness?”

“Yeah, it’s mostly in the afternoon although I’ve woken up a few times and rushed to the bathroom. I’m also a little more fatigued during the day, but it’s nothing I can’t handle. I take a nap in my office.”

She printed off copies of our ultrasound. “I want to see you back here in four weeks. If you have any concerns at all, please don’t hesitate to call me Claire.” She nodded at Jamie before she left us so I could change back into my clothes.

Jamie, ever the gentleman waited for me out in the hall. “Are ye hungry?”

I took off the day from work. “I’m feeling kind of peckish.” I schedule my next scan and we picked up our copies of our baby.

It was surreal to be in this position again with him, but I didn’t regret my actions that night like I told him then. Our baby was meant to be. It wasn’t ideal in the slightest, but sometimes that’s how life operated. Doors opened and closed regularly, and it was a matter of choosing the right door at
the right moment.

“Do you mind if we pick something up or have something delivered instead?” I wanted to go home and changed into comfy clothes with one of my blankets wrapped tightly around me. He shook his head.

“Maybe next time I can pick you up instead,” he offered.

Towards the end, I would definitely need him to drive me around. I knew I would end up roughly the size of a whale by the end of the pregnancy. With Bree, I was enormous and couldn’t wait for eviction from my uterus.

She was content to remain, but thank god she came the day she was supposed to. April 15th was the due date for this baby. A spring baby would be lovely compared to my autumn babies. Isla, Bree, and myself had birthdays cluttered at the end of the year. Jamie’s was in May, so it was nice to celebrate a birthday besides a few months before Christmas.

It was always hard with Bree because I had to consider what I wanted her to have as a birthday present or a Christmas present. Her birthday was four weeks from the day, and depending on the year, I might have already done my shopping for both.

The worst was when it fell on thanksgiving. We couldn’t celebrate on the day aside from a cake with friends. We either celebrated the week after or before. The only presents she opened if it fell on thanksgiving were from family, and that was in the morning when we had free time. It fell on thanksgiving last year, and I felt terrible.

Instead of asking for specific presents, she asked if we could go out shopping for new winter clothes on Black Friday. While I wasn’t a fan of shopping, especially on that particular Friday, it was something about her request that had me out of my house and at the mall.

She had such a good nature and didn’t care if her birthday was on thanksgiving. She said she appreciated that she could be around her friends.

I pulled into my driveway with Jamie right behind me. Before I could open the door, he was doing it for me and grabbed my belongings. “I ken ye can do it yerself, but I just want to offer any support I can.”

I let it go, knowing it wouldn’t do anything but start an argument. He was trying to make my life easier. “It’s fine,” I admitted, and I actually saw the air escape as he exhaled. “Do you mind if I order pizza?”

Twenty minutes later, we were in the family room with me in my comfy clothes and my feet on the couch in fuzzy socks. A blanket was draped across my lap. “Claire, I have to say ye’ve surprised me.” I sat up, my attention on him as I waited for him to elaborate. “Normally, ye would’ve bitten my head off at suggesting ye weren’t capable of carrying yer purse.” My cheeks flushed. “I dinna mean for it to be a criticism.”

“To be truthful, I don’t want to fight with you about anything. We’ve done enough of that. I don’t want to waste all this time for us to realize in the future it’s too late. We wasted nine years, which is about a fourth of our lives. I can’t keep waking up and thinking is this it? Is this what the rest of my life will be like?” He watched me with those Fraser blues. “We can go back and forth, but what I want is to move forward. I want us to become a family with our daughters and this new life we’ve created.”

A glass dropped from the hallway, and my gaze was drawn towards a shadowy figure. Then I
realized who it was, “Isla…” but she had already run back up the stairs, slamming her bedroom door in the process.

I fell back onto the couch and threw my right arm over my face. “That went well.”

“We will talk to her. Right now, she needs sometime to think about it and then we will talk to her together about the baby.” Jamie was being the voice of reason, and I was enjoying it. For once, I didn’t have to do it on my own. There was someone else to help with the pressures of raising two girls. “I should probably clean up the glass.”

I forgot she dropped her cup. “What is she even doing home?”

Jamie turned to face me with an inquisitive expression. “I thought ye knew the lass was here.”

I gave him an ‘are you crazy’ look. “If I knew she was here, I wouldn’t have talked so openly about the baby. It’s still too early in the pregnancy to tell anyone. Besides she has school, I make the girls go unless they’re running a temperature or throwing up. I even dropped her off this morning so I don’t know how she got here.”

On top of the whole baby thing, we would apparently have to discuss skipping school. “I wish there was a manual on how to raise a pre-teen.” Jamie snickered.

I heard the clinking of glass pieces as he swept them up. “Claire, she’s a mini you.”

I removed my arm to give him a withering look. I didn’t appreciate the comparison because I never behaved like that in my life.

“Oh dinna look at me like that, ye were just the same. At sixteen, ye rolled your eyes, crossed yer arms, stamped around, and dinna get me started about the cigarettes.”

I had gone through a bit of a rebellious stage. “Your point?” I muttered.

“She’s going through all those things, maybe not the smoking bit, but things are changing. We can ground her later, but let’s just give her space to sort herself.”

He was right and I kind of hated him for it. Parenting was effortless for him, or at least that’s the way I saw it. “How are you so good at this?”

He was puzzled as he settled back on the couch. “What?”

“Being a parent.”

He let out a guffaw and then laughed. He clutched at his stomach as his laughter became stronger. His face was red from the force of his laughs. My eyes narrowed as I waited for him to settle down. “Ye dinna see yerself clearly, or ye dinna give yerself enough credit. Those two girls are a byproduct of your hard work as a single mother all these years. They admire you and love ye so much. They even gave me a little speech last week about what would happen if I were to hurt you at all. Ye had to make all the tough decisions, so if I can ease that just a little for you, I don’t have a problem doing so.”

“You’re a good man James Alexander Malcolm Mackenzie Fraser.” He was left slightly flustered and tried to brush off my words. “Sometimes I can’t believe you’re real.”

He scooted closer to me, his hand grasping my own. “You gave me the chance. I want to be like this for you Mo Nighean Donn. There’s no other woman on this planet worth all the trouble,” his lips twitched and so did my own.
“You think you’re real smart,” I sat up on my knees, ready to attack him.

A toothy smile and a nod of his head, and I was tickling him. The doorbell rang interrupting our war. He left to take care of it and came back with the pizza. “Do ye want it?”

He knew not to tease me with pizza. “Jamie,” I smiled with gritted teeth. “If you know what’s good for you, you better hand over that pizza.”

He ducked as I attempted to grab the box from him. “Say Jamie is the most brilliant, sexy, and charming man I’ve ever met.”

I glowered at him with pursed lips. I couldn’t see any other way out of it for me. He was stronger, taller and faster than myself. I rolled my eyes. “Jamie is the most brilliant, sexy, and charming man I’ve ever met,” I told him without any emotion in my voice. “You’re an ass,” I shoved him out of the way as I dug into the pizza.

“But ye love me,” he replied smugly.

“God help me, but I do.”

We enjoyed our lunch together and talked strategy about how best to handle Isla. We didn’t want her blurtling out to anyone, her sister especially about the baby. If Isla told Bree, it was downhill from there as that girl couldn’t keep a secret to save her life. If a thought popped into her head, it came out of her mouth. It was something I learned to accept and love about my baby girl.

“She had started to notice something odd about you anyways and was quite skeptical about the whole food poisoning.” It was a flimsy excuse at best. “Also why is she watching Mamma Mia?”

I rolled my eyes at him. “She enjoys musicals. It’s on Netflix. I can’t force her to watch children’s television anymore.” He was put out with me, but I didn’t care. While Isla was his little girl, she wasn’t a little kid. She knew about things.

Before we could discuss the matter anymore, footsteps sounded on the stairs. I heard the padding of her feet against the wood flooring. She was slow to approach, but finally she came into the room with a frightened expression on her face. Her eyes were a bit red and her face splotchy. “Are you really having a baby?”

I patted the space on the couch beside me. She came willingly and snuggled into my side. Jamie made room and was understanding about her need to be close to me. “Yes, your dad and I are going to have another baby. Things are going to change and you will be a big sister again.”

“I don’t know how I feel,” she quietly admitted.

I ran my fingers through her hair and shushed her. “It’s okay love, we weren’t even going to tell you or your sister for a few more weeks. It’s still early.”

Her head turned to Jamie. Anxiety radiated off of her and her body was a little tense. “W-will you love the new baby more because you get to be with them all the time?”

I wanted to bury my face in her hair and cry. I wanted to hug her and never let her go because only such an innocent question could come from a child. Sometimes under her stony exterior, I caught a peek of my little girl. She wasn’t always willing to show her vulnerability or the side of her that was most definitely still a child.

Jamie took both of her hands in his own. “Isla, ye’re my first born. There’s something special there that can’t be taken away from us. I couldn’t love any child more than you or yer sister. I ken
it’s hard to understand at this age, but it’s simply impossible. The heart just expands to give us more room to love. Like I’m sure ye can’t imagine loving a new sibling like you love Bree because of all the time, it’s been only the two of ye.” Her body was slowly relaxing into my own. “I dinna want ye to ever think I love any of ye more than the other. Is that understood?”

She gave a firm nod, her body shaking with sobs. “I’m sorry daddy.” Jamie tugged on her hands, forcing her body to come to his as he softly cooed to her and rocked her in his arms.

“I love ye so much. Ye gave me faith when I thought I had none left.”

It took sometime before I could coax her out of her father’s arms because while we had gotten the whole pregnancy issue out of the way, there was still the whole skipping thing. She more than likely thought we forgot in the heat of the moment, but I’ve been at this parenting thing for a while. My pregnancy brain hadn’t kicked in just yet.

“So want to tell me why you’re home and not at school where I left you?”

She turned to me with wide eyes and a guilty look on her face, and I was suddenly nervous to find out the answer.

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*Though we're tethered to the story we must tell*  
When I saw you, well I knew we'd tell it well  
With a whisper we will tame the vicious seas  
Like a feather bringing kingdoms to their knees

*-Turning Page, Sleeping At Last*

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Chapter End Notes

So I’m still going through some family drama. My mom is kind of crazy, but luckily I’m at an age and in a position where I don’t have to see her if I don’t want to. And then at the end of last week, I was so freaking tired and sore from traipsing around Chicago. I do apologize for my shitty timing with posting. This chapter also was eluding me for the longest time for some reason. I don’t know what it was. The first half didn’t even start at out as the first half. The imagination takes you all kinds of places.

Anyways you guys can find me on Tumblr under jmoonrise or on Twitter under jmoonrise. I’m always happy to talk to you guys. You guys give the best feedback and encouragement. Sometimes you guys even make me cry. Or a lot of times lol. Also because August is the best month ever (sorry guys but it is lol) and not just because that’s when a certain author was born) there will be quite a lot of posts as I try to finish the story.
Changes

Chapter Summary

An inside look at what's going on in Isla's head.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

IPOV

I stared at my mom, anxiety coursing through my blood as I thought about how to explain why I was home. School started three hours ago and that was most definitely where I was supposed to be.

Tears pooled in my eyes and I looked away unable to hold her stare any longer because I knew without a doubt I was in some serious trouble.

My mother readjusted her position. Her face was firm, resolute, and anger sparked in her eyes. No matter what I answered, she was going to kill me and bury me in the backyard.

Her lips thinned and her eyes blazed with that unspoken fury of hers. My dad hadn’t witnessed us getting into trouble, nor had he really had to punish us for anything because we always tried to put our best foot forth when we stayed with him during summer vacation. Our time with him was limited, and Bree and I generally called a truce.

Sometimes we simply couldn’t resist the urge to pick a fight with one another. Bree could be so freaking annoying. She was always in my stuff and wanting to borrow my clothes without asking. She left a mess wherever she went, and was just irritating. She never shut up and talked all the time even when I told her be quiet.

“Okay,” I heard the steel in her voice, the longer I remained quiet. “I’m going to ask you again. Why are you home? How did you even get here?”

I put on my best innocent expression. “Well… grandma picked me up.” I watched as her face got all red by my non answer.

“Isla Faith Fraser, I will ground you until the end of existence if I don’t start getting answers now.”

My eyes darted away. I almost turned to my dad with my pleading eyes, but mom wore the pants and was bad cop. He wouldn’t know how to begin punishing me or dealing with the situation. If anything, I almost preferred if it was just dad and I because I would surely get off scot free.

Mom on the other hand had little tolerance for our antics and poor decision making. “Igotintoafightatschool.” I rushed through my words, hoping against all hope she hadn’t caught what I said or I would be totally in for it. Mom hated when any sort of physical altercation took place, and completely believed in using words instead of fists. I didn’t always agree with that particular opinion because sometimes a person needed a fist in their mouth to shut up.
Mom mouthed what I said and I saw as she tried to process my words. I hadn’t gotten in trouble at school since the third grade when I shoved a boy in the dirt and beat him to a pulp for picking on my sister. He never so much as looked in Bree’s direction after that incident. I merely got a written warning as it was my first offense, although the headmaster was clear that I was to keep my hands to myself as the school had a strict no fighting policy.

Mom wasn’t exactly pleased I took things into my hands, but praised me for standing up for my sister. She then went and grounded me for two weeks afterwards. While she was proud, I couldn’t get away with beating up other kids even if they were bullying my sister. I rolled my eyes when she turned her back.

“I’m going to need you to repeat that for me to make sure I’m clear on what you said.” Mom wasn’t dumb by any stretch of the word. She was quite sure of what came out of my mouth. She wanted me to repeat it loud and clear for her so I could admit what I did. “I got in a fight, okay?” I crossed my arms with a huff.

She constantly ragged on me about everything. I loved her, but she could be just as annoying as my sister. She was always after us about leaving messes and not cleaning up after ourselves. She was a giant pain in my ass, not that I was supposed to use that word.

I’d had my mouth washed out by many a people in my almost twelve years. Mom did it when I was five after I let out the F-bomb in front of our priest. I told him mass was fucking boring and he should sing and dance or something to make it better.

I hadn’t ever seen mom’s face like that before or since. It was a mixture of embarrassment, anger, and barely controlled rage directed right at me. I cried at the first taste of soap and tried to wipe it off, but mom made me hold my arms at my sides for a full minute before allowing me to rinse with water.

My aunt Jenny also made me hold a bar of soap in my mouth for calling young Ian, an annoying little shit and pushing him into the mud to get him to stop following me and Kitty around. She made me hold it for two minutes to wash the filth out of my mouth. I thought it was a bit hypocritical as she swore quite often and fluently, but I wisely didn’t point it out to her.

Grandma got on me more than once about my mouth. Dad was the only who never made me do it, but I never said expletives in front of him. Besides there have been studies that have shown people who swear have better vocabularies and people tend to relate to them more often. They also find them to be more honest, not that mom would appreciate that argument.

Anyways mom was giving me the look, the one that said I better start talking or things would get far worse if she had to call my school to find out what happened. I was counting on the fact she normally worked Mondays to hide my infraction.

I took a deep breath and prepared for what was sure to be a long and boring lecture, highlighting the importance of not fighting and how I was ground for like ever.

“What do you mean you got in a fight? Did you start it?” Her eyes were always how I could tell what sort of mood she was in, and how receptive she was to certain things. I knew I was in a lot of trouble.

I licked my lips as they suddenly felt dry. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth as I opened and shut my mouth a few times. I lowered my eyes and uncrossed my arms, trying to show some repentance, not that I particularly felt that but if my mom believed I did, well it couldn’t hurt. “I shoved her first, but she started it with her words.” I was still steaming on the inside about what
Lyla Reynolds said to me. The only thing to soothe the sting of her words was recalling the crunch of her nose as my fist connected with her nose.

She got a few good ones in too. My sides ached, and my skin was starting to mottle with splotches of purple, green, and blue. My back was the most sore as she shoved me into the lockers and then threw me onto the linoleum. Her bony elbows dug into my ribs and then aimed a good kick at my side. I clawed at her face. Scratch marks marred her cheeks and she screeched loudly as the teachers finally pulled us apart.

The headmistress suspended both of us for the rest of the week. I had to collect all of my assignments while she called my grandmother. I told her my mom was in surgery all day and was unable to receive any calls. My grandma wasn’t pleased, but she couldn’t punish me in the same way my mom could. She scolded me the entire way home and took my phone from me. She reminded me if I didn’t tell my mom, she was already planning to call later that night or just pop in for a visit.

I saw my mom take a few steady breaths. “Tell me what happened from the beginning and then we will talk about it before I decide on your punishment.”

“Well after second period, I was on my way to English. Lyla decided to knock my books out of my arms and laugh as I started picking them up. Then she called me stuff and said some other things I didn’t like.” I averted my eyes, hoping my mother didn’t decide to force me to elaborate.

Her words were hurled like bricks and had their desired effect. I cringed and cowered as she aimed and threw them at her target, me. “After her last comment, I shoved her. It didn’t do much, but she was caught off guard. Then she pushed me into the lockers and pushed her back. Then she shoved me with extra force into the lockers, I bent over at the pain. She took her opportunity and knocked me to the ground.” I still heard her laughter ringing in the air and she grinned down at me helpless on the ground. “She kicked me a few times. I knocked her legs from under her,” thanks a million to my mom for tae kwon do lessons. I quit in sixth grade, only two belts away from a black belt. “My fist collided with her face and there was scratch and screaming involved. She was actually quick on her feet and managed to get up fast.”

My mom scrutinized me, submerging the room into silence as she considered my words and examined my story thoroughly. There was a frostiness that descended. No one moved and I nearly forgot my dad was in there with us. It was strange because I’d never gotten into serious trouble with him there to witness. He was always in Scotland, and only heard stories secondhand, not that my mom shared every wrongdoing. She barely spoke to him, only telling him our most serious offenses.

“Alright lass, I want to ken what the other girl said?”

“Quoi?” I played dumb.

He turned me around to face him. “Well ye seemed quite glad to skip over that part of yer story, so there must be something she said to ye for you to react the way you did.” There was a knowing glint in his eyes, and I hated it. I hated how he thought he knew me so well when he was never there. He was gone all this time and then comes back thinking he can fit back into the family he left behind. We had to figure out how to live life without him, but now all of a sudden we are good for him.

I scowled angrily at him. “What do you care?” I was acting snotty, but it was rich of him to suddenly become so involved in parenting Bree and myself.

“Ye’re my daughter. I also dinna appreciate yer tone, young lady. Ye’re not an adult and canna
talk to me however you’d like. Ye’re a child, and I deserve some respect.” His face was red, sort of like moms. His frame vibrated with his anger.

It was a strange combination as her frostiness and his heat collided with me caught in the middle. It was two warring personalities, and both were aimed at me. “It’s not like you’ve ever shown an interest before so why start now. You can continue the way you always have.” A part of me was furious with him. I thought sometimes I hated him for always being absent when needed. “You know there’s not much difference between you and toilet paper. You’re both always gone when you’re needed.” With those last stabbing words, I stormed out of the room and stomped my way up to my room.

I slammed the door and locked it with a loud click. I threw myself on top of my bed and cried at how much the situation escalated. I knew I was going to be in a fair bit of trouble when my mom finally absorbed the full impact of my tantrum. My headmistress was more than likely planning a call anyways. She would inform her of my suspension and how I’d skipped class at the end of last week and got busted by my coach. Since my coach busted me, she let her choose my punishment.

I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs at just everything.

While I was ecstatic at the presence of my dad, nasty thoughts entered my head about how we didn’t need him because he would eventually just leave again like he did the first time.

It would be better if he left now instead of later when we grew attached and dependent upon him again. We survived this long without him, and we could do it again.

It was horrible to think because I knew my dad wasn’t really that kind of person and there were extenuating circumstances regarding his first exit from our lives, but I still held this bitterness in my heart.

All those times he wasn’t there, and then all of a sudden he was and we were all supposed to act as if it were something completely normal.

Instead of filing an official report for skipping class, my coach wrote me a note and tasked me with extra laps at the next practice, which I obviously wouldn’t be at. I was also on clean up duty for the next month after practice.

I couldn’t talk about any of this with my parents because I didn’t want to see the hurt expression on my dad’s face when I admitted I wasn’t entirely sure about his commitment to us and I wasn’t prepared for what a family with him might look like. I knew I wasn’t meant to hear about the baby, but that was another issue. I was comfortable with it being only my sister and myself because that’s all I knew. By the time the new baby arrived, I would be twelve. Bree would be ten. The kid wouldn’t have anyone to play with because Bree and I were busy most of the time.

My parents had to be those people who forgot to use protection. It was an added complication, and I hated to see them with their happy smiles and overall excitement about the situation. Clearly, they hadn’t thought it through because it was not a good idea at all.

They only just got back together, I think. I wasn’t aware of what their status was, but they weren’t married. They barely were speaking to each other three months ago and because of a one time tryst, they were going to be parents yet again. They couldn’t say goodbye like normal people, and instead went for the complete cliché of having sex.

No wonder mom freaked out after I got my first period. She must’ve suspected the absence of her own and then realized she was pregnant. She couldn’t have been too far along at that point, but it would’ve been a concern for a doctor to have a missed period.
I hated them for bringing all of this uncertainty into our lives. My mom had all these expectations. While I was for the most part mature for my age and quite smart (not that I’ve been tested because my mom refused to let my school do it), I was still only eleven. I didn’t know how to handle all of this.

My dad kept looking at me with his sad puppy eyes as if constantly realizing everything he missed, but there wasn’t anything any of us could do to bring back that time together. It was gone. We could only go forth, which I think we were all struggling with.

My mom was trying her best to forgive him. He was doing his best not to resent her for the time she had with us. Bree was confused. She went between confusion and happiness. It was different for her because she didn’t remember anything from before, while I didn’t have a lot of memories, there were things I clung to and confirmed later with my mom to make sure they were real.

I stayed in my room, not straying out for anything. I had a bathroom and a tap. A person could survive quite some time without food. I probably wouldn’t make that argument to my mom, knowing her penchant for histrionics whenever I mentioned I wasn’t hungry. All of a sudden, she tried diagnosing me with a multitude of things.

I can’t say how much time passed before there was a knock on my door.

BPOV

I knocked hesitantly on Isla’s door. It wasn’t normally locked, and I didn’t usually invade her room. She didn’t like me in her room, but mommy was acting all weird when she picked me up.

I was also kind of surprised she picked me up in the first place from school because she usually worked. Rarely was she the one to come and get me, only because there was always a patient or a surgery or her residents. I didn’t mind because I was proud of her.

Female surgeons were awesome and there weren’t a bazillion of them. My mom was so cool, and sometimes I thought about being a doctor. Then I decided it was too gross cutting open people and fixing their insides.

I puked when I skinned my knee really badly and there was a lot of blood. Blood is nasty, and mommy was a hero for being able to do what she did.

Mommy was super tense and had her hands really tight on the wheel. I could see the veins in her hands sticking out.

Her sentences were short and clipped. I didn’t remember doing anything to make her mad, so I couldn’t figure out what her problem was. Sometimes she just got mad at dumb stuff like if I forgot to put the milk back in the fridge for the second time and it went bad again.

I was scared to ask her what was wrong because I didn’t want to be in trouble. It could be daddy as he made her have all sorts of weird reactions. I never saw her behave like that before, or be all weird whenever he was mentioned.

I listened in on phone calls between her and Aunt Jenny, and mommy always sounded really sad when she talked about him. She cried sometimes and then talked about how she couldn’t forgive him. I was confused because there seemed to be a lot more she wasn’t saying, and I couldn’t put it into context like how my teacher taught us to do. Context clues were important, but without knowing all the facts, it was impossible to put it all together.

“Bree, go to your room,” mommy ordered me as soon as she pulled into the driveway. “You
aren’t in trouble, but I just need you upstairs.”

I scurried out of the car and up the stairs because she could say anything else. I noticed Isla’s backpack by the door and the shoes she wore to school and frowned. She was never home this early. She had practice on Mondays and then piano lessons.

I changed out of my school uniform into some comfy clothes to lounge around the house. Then I popped my head out of my room to make sure my mom wasn’t around since she actually told me to go to my room. Then I darted down the hall to Isla’s room and knocked.

If her door was closed, it meant it was locked. It was typical Isla.

I waited, wondering if she was going to unlock the door and let me in or not. She was finicky, and if she was mad, then my chances of knowing the whole story were unlikely. Her and mommy were alike.

I heard her soft footsteps and then the lock clicked. She grabbed my arm and pulled me into the room before quietly closing it with a soft click. I rubbed the tender spot on my upper arm where she roughly grabbed me. “Ow,” I muttered, looking up to glare at her, but then softened my face when I saw the expression on her face. “What’s wrong?” I took a seat on her bed and waited for her to explain.

She did the nervous thing she did with her hands. She twisted her fingers. “I’m in a lot of trouble. I got into a fight at school and got grandma to get me. I didn’t know mom would be home today, and I overheard something.” She bit her lip with a guilty look aimed at me. “I wish I could tell you, but mom and dad made me promise not to say anything.”

I tilted my head as I caught the way she said dad. “Why did you say it like that?”

“Say what like what?” Her face was the picture of confusion, but I knew her better than that. We’ve been sisters for almost ten years, and have had countless fights. I knew the tone she used for everything and the faces she made.

I crossed my arms and merely gave her a look. She threw herself into her chair. “Okay so I said dad weirdly. It’s just I’m so… ugh,” she tried to search for a word to describe what was happening in her head. I knew the feeling quite well lately. “I guess frustrated is a good word. Dad comes back and it’s like we are supposed to be this perfect family. He scolds me and takes my phone as if he paid for it.”

Ah...it was making more sense by the minute. I was feeling some of that as well. It was great to have daddy back, but I didn’t know how to act around him. He came to my game, and I was really happy to have him there. It was the first game he ever attended. It hurt a little when I was reminded that I’d been playing soccer since I could kick a ball.

“Tell me about the fight,” it wasn’t like Isla to get into fights with other kids. Me, it was a different story. We were siblings and fought over everything. She accused me of stealing her clothes. We fought over the remote. We argued over who the favorite was or how something happened. We fought about equal food portions and everything else in between. She drove me crazy, but she wasn’t usually the type to actually fight with anyone else.

It took her a few minutes to start the story as she sorted through it herself. I saw her visibly sifting through her memories, trying to recall everything with perfect clarity. “I was angry with Lyla. She talked about how dad left us, how she would be ashamed to have a daughter like me as well, she made fun of me because I’m you know,” she waved a hand over her chest area. “Not well...endowed,” she whispered, a blush creeping up her cheeks.
“She sounds like a real jerk. Why did you rise to the bait?” She ignored those type of people, mostly. There was Billy who bullied me and she kicked his ass.

She leaned her head against her desk. “It’s because it isn’t the first time. I was tired of her saying stuff and then acting as if she accidentally said it. She said mom obviously wasn’t woman enough to hold his attention, and he must’ve left to get away from all of us. Then she said mom must be knocked up or something if he’s back because that’s the only way to explain his sudden reappearance.”

My hands balled into fists as I found myself craving throwing a few punches. I hated bullies and girls were always the worst. “So did you kick her ass?” Mommy didn’t know we sometimes used bad words, but in some cases you simply had to.

Isla gave me a proud smirk. “Of course I did, she had it coming. I’m pretty sure I broke her nose, which means she’s also going to have black eyes. Sadly, I didn’t get away unscathed from the encounter. She shoved me into lockers and then threw me onto the floor and kicked me. There was some scratching involved,” and her smile grew exponentially.

“What is mom’s problem? She’s all mad and stuff.”

“Well obviously she caught me,” I nodded because duh. “But first her, dad, and I had a conversation,” she rolled her eyes. I wanted to know what she overheard, but she didn’t want to share that information at all. It was unfair. I pouted. “I can’t tell you, otherwise mom will be more mad at me.”

I huffed, rolled my eyes, and pouted some more because everyone was in on this secret but me. “Anyways after she then realized I was home and asked why I was here. I had to admit to getting into the fight, then she jumped down my throat. Then dad had to add his two cents, and I blew up at them because of all the people to be lecturing me it was rich of him to finally have some involvement.”

I hadn’t realized how much she resented daddy. I knew she had a lot of feelings about him. She never really talked about it, but I saw it. It was in the way she held back from him when we visited, or the glares she sent him when we went home at the end of each summer. I knew she was happy to see him and do things with him.

“Why did it make you mad?”

Her eyes were a storm of grey clouds. It was sometimes unclear what color they actually were. She threw up her hands. “I guess because he comes back and acts all pathetic like we didn’t wish for him to be here too. He’s had all these years to come back and he choose now when there’s another baby-“ her eyes widened in shock as she slapped her hands over her mouth.

My mouth fell open and I stared at her in shock. She couldn’t mean what she just said. There was no way. “Mommy is pregnant?” I’m sure my face looked dumb, but I couldn’t believe this. “Na uh,” I shook my head, ready to disprove her.

Yet, it explained why she threw up or why she didn’t like some foods anymore. I laid back on the bed as I tried to wrap my head around it. I liked it being just Isla and myself. I knew what to expect with her. With a new baby, the attention we received would be divided between three kids instead of two.

“I don’t want another sibling.” I said to her. “How can she does this to us?”

Isla stared at me as if I were missing the bigger point. “What?” I shrugged my shoulders.
She muttered under her breath and made some sort of grunting noise. “Oh you’re so stupid.”

“Am not,” I declared.

“It’s dad’s baby too, you idiot.”

Well that hadn’t really hit me. It could’ve been Peter’s. “So that’s what you heard?” I asked her to confirm what she walked in on earlier.

“Yes, they didn’t want me to tell you since mom is only like eight weeks or something. I don’t think they need another baby.”

“We don’t even get a say. It’s not fair. We finally have daddy back, but there’s going to be someone else. They got to deal with a poopy, crying baby, and they won’t have any time for us. That’s crap.” I was fuming.

For so long, it was the three of us, then dad came and changed things. It wasn’t bad, but it was different than what we knew. I enjoyed the day out with them back in June, but it was new. I hadn’t ever had a day where I was with the two of them and it was us. My parents never saw each other, and preferred phone conversations on the phone. Mommy never wanted to talk when we FaceTimed. She let us have the time for ourselves, or so she said.

I wasn’t as naïve as I was then and understood some stuff.

Isla was in agreement with me. “I was fine with the two of us. Mom and dad said they won’t love us any different, but this is a chance for them not to screw up someone else’s life.”

At first, I didn’t know what she meant, then I thought about us. Most of our life we only had one parent raising us, but this new baby would have mom and dad from the very beginning. They wouldn’t know what it meant for a parent to live all the way across an ocean. They wouldn’t have to travel each summer and spent two months away from everyone they knew just to have the chance to be with their dad. “This is crap.” This new baby would have everything we didn’t.

Isla crossed the room and wrapped an arm around my shoulder. I leaned my leaned my head on hers, and we simply sat there with her offering some comfort. Throughout all of this, I would still have her in the end. She was my best friend even if she was annoying. “So how long do you think you’ll be grounded?” I felt her grimace at the reminder of her future punishment. While mommy hadn’t dished it out yet, it was coming especially since Isla stormed out of the room. It was bad enough to get into trouble at school, but then she got an attitude and yelled at our parents. She was likely to get grounded at least until her birthday, and mommy might even cancel our plans. We wanted to play laser tag. Mommy’s moods weren’t predictable at the moment though and even when she wasn’t pregnant, she wasn’t always that forgiving when we did naughty things.

“Probably a month, grandma already took my phone. She was pissed when came to get me. Good thing I never continued to get my black belt.” She cracked a smile before sighing. “I’ll have to apologize to them. I was angry.”

I held her hand. “I know.” If anyone understood, it was me. “Daddy showing up wasn’t what we were expecting. It isn’t bad, but I don’t know how to act around him.”

She turned over my palm and stared at our hands. Hers was a little frecklier than mine. “It hasn’t been a week yet, but it feels like everything is changing all at once.”

And we had no control.

There was a knock on the door. I froze at the sound because I was supposed to be in my room, not
in Isla’s. “Isla, do you think we could talk?” Mommy’s voice sounded really tired. I pictured her face with it’s dark circles and the tight lines around her eyes when she was really stressed.

Mommy respected our space and knocked even though it was her house. She didn’t want us to feel as if we had no privacy. She reminded us that it was a privilege easily taken away if we abused it.

Isla stood, glanced briefly at me before going to the door. As soon as she opened it to reveal our mom, I scurried out of the room. They had a lot of talking to do and didn’t need me interfering. Mommy sent me a look that said we’d talk later about disobeying her. I avoided her eyes as I went back to my room.

I had a lot to think about. I was going to be a big sister, and I wasn’t happy about it. For my friend Reagan, the idea of a sibling was something to smile about. She was an only child, and her parents started trying a long time ago to have another kid. Her mom lost another baby, and they were considering adoption.

I never wanted another sibling. If Gabriel was alive, it would be different because I was too young to know any different,

I paced the length of my room until I was fed up with the motion and headed towards my closet to find my diary. It helped if I could write down my thoughts somewhere even if I was the only who read them.

CPOV

I watched as Bree went back to her room. I wasn’t entirely surprised she went to her sister. While they argue and bickered over silly things that wouldn’t matter in a week, let alone a few years, they typically shared everything with one another.

I patted the bed for her to join me when she seemed recalcitrant. Unfortunately both girls inherited a heavy dose of obstinacy from Jamie and myself. It wasn’t exactly a great combination when I found myself dealing with tantrums and long periods of refusing to acknowledge my presence.

“Sit,” I ordered her, quickly tiring of her behavior. It was disrespectful, and while I sympathized with her anger, I refused to tolerate rudeness. She did as I asked. “Your headmistress rang earlier to explain what occurred, it was essentially as you said. As you know, I have strong feelings in regards to fighting. If she had thrown the first punch or shoved first, I might’ve been more lenient of what happened. As it stands, you shoved first, while I’m sure you felt justified, I have to ground you for a month.”

Her eyes brimmed with tears at her punishment, but there was still thinly veiled anger in those dark blue orbs. Something was brewing.

“Fine then I’m grounded,” she replied snottily. “Is that all?”

I wasn’t entirely sure where her attitude came from as she was fine last week. We hadn’t any issues with one another in a few weeks. Occasionally, she was irritating with her constant need for her mobile and messaging her friends, but I figured it was mainly the age was at.

“No that’s not all,” I said, frustration seeping through. “You’ve been a right monster. You’re bratty attitude isn’t appreciated, and I would like it if we could talk about it before I punish you.”

For a second there I felt like I was making some kind of progress, but then she masked her emotions. “I don’t want to talk.” She muttered, turning away from me.
I forced her to face me. “I don’t care what you would like. Something is bothering you and as your mother, I want to know so I can fix it.”

I saw the stubborn set of her chin and her crossed arms told me I wasn’t going to get anywhere with her at the moment. “Fine then for your other behavior, I’m giving you two weeks, and you won’t get your phone back until I decide you’ve earned it.”

She was gob smacked by my punishment. “Y-you can’t do that,” she stuttered. “This isn’t fair. You’re the one who gets knocked up and I’m in trouble.” Somehow I knew the baby thing wasn’t going to be easy for her to accept. “You and dad are totally ruining everything, like totally,” she screeched, running for her bathroom.

I wasn’t sure what to do to help her come to terms with the baby. I didn’t want to imagine Bree’s reaction if Isla reacted like this. While Bree was generally a sunny and happy child, she also enjoyed her position as youngest in our family. She was the baby. She loved her little cousin, but he was also an ocean away and she never had direct competition.

I felt the pounding in my head begin and sighed. My day took a serious turn.

I sent Jamie home to cool his heels as his daughter cooled her own. In some ways, they were quite alike. There was the explosive temper and how quick they were to anger.

Jamie was ready to yell at her and punish her until the end of the century. I knew he had never had to seriously punish the girls before, and I didn’t want anything excessive. His little angels weren’t always angels and had a mind all of their own. I gathered a lot of Isla’s anger was directed at Jamie.

I wondered if perhaps I should put her back in therapy to help her deal. She had to talk to a therapist in the past to deal with her rage at the recommendation of her teacher and the school. Isla refused to discuss what was bothering her, but she learned methods to help.

It was occurring to me her issues revolved around her father. His absence bothered her more than she was ever willing to voice and far more than her sister.

“Isla, I’m sorry this isn’t the way you pictured everything when you wanted your dad and I to get back together.” I exhaled slowly. “Sadly reality is often the exact opposite. Real life is messy, and we can’t control how other people feel or react.”

I heard the click of the lock, the creaking of the door was next. A blue eye was visible in the small crack. “If it’s what I wanted, how come I don’t feel good about it?”

Sometimes I think despite her keen intelligence, she forgot how young she was. She could explain all sorts of things to me, but complex emotions were difficult for her because at the end of the day she was eleven. Books and school didn’t teach everything. Much of what a person knows comes from personal experience. She lacked the experience to explain what was going on inside of her internally. It was also something entirely new to her. What she dreamed up in that brain of hers was exactly that, a dream. There was no sense of reality because she never thought it would happen, and if it did, well it would be perfect.

“I think you expected it work out like it does in books and movies. Your dad and I would kiss and it would be perfect.” The door opened a bit more to reveal her face, and from her expression I knew I hit it on the nose. “Well love, there’s a reason movies always end at the happy spot. They end at the wedding or a passionate kiss because marriage and relationships are work. They aren’t something you can put in a little effort and expect a huge pay back. No one truly wants to see the actual hardships because you want there to be a sense of idealism, not realism. It’s better to believe
I saw the down turning of her lips and felt terrible for telling her that. “I’m not saying those relationships might not work out, but even one of your favorite movies The Parent Trap, both the old and new ended with a kiss and the decision to remarry. We never see what’s after that because it was probably awkward and confusing. You want to feel happy at the end, not sad or nervous about the odds.”

Isla crawled out of the bathroom and leaned against the doorway instead of hiding. “I guess you’re right,” she admitted begrudgingly, so like her father. “I wish it could be like that.” There was optimism in her voice, and I wouldn't destroy it for anything.

“Then it wouldn’t be real,” I told her. “As hard as it is sometimes, I would rather have something real than fake. I think you feel the same way.” I hoped she did.

“Yeah,” her fingers traced patterns in the wood. She wasn't quite looking at me, but at least we were talking and not screaming or ignoring one another.

I left her alone to think because the day had given her a lot to consider. I wasn’t expecting much on the baby front because I knew it would take months for her. She wasn’t all too sure about Bree for ages until one day, it clicked for her that the squalling baby wasn’t going anywhere. “Dinner will be ready in an hour,” I made lasagna, her favorite in the hopes of cheering her up. She was looking a bit peckish lately, more than likely a growth spurt.

I cleared my throat. “Okay,” she said.

I was slightly envious of Jamie living in an apartment twenty minutes away because he could leave. The two of them would be the death of me. That was for sure.

I decided to leave Bree for after dinner. I was too exhausted and decided a kip was in order. The alarm was set on my phone for 45 minutes. My eyes shut the minute my head hit the pillow and the pounding disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

So a lot of what Isla is experiencing is based off of my own personal experiences. They say write what you know.

The next chapter will post tomorrow. Next week will hopefully be the bulk of all the new chapters and the days leading up to my next birthday in less than 2 weeks. August always makes me so happy, but sort of sad because it means the year is close to ending.

Let me know what you guys think and if you want more of Isla and Bree in the future.
It’s the dreaded author’s note. So I have food poisoning and all I want is the comfort of my friend the toilet (we were acquainted the last time I had food poisoning.) I’m hoping to recover soon enough. I think it happened at the wedding reception I attended the other day because just a few hours later I felt terrible. I’m so sorry about the delay and will resume writing as soon as I possibly can. August is quickly becoming not my month.
CPOV

I woke up with the remnants of a dull ache in my head, but feeling far more refreshed than I had in the last few hours. It was amazing what a little sleep could fix. Sadly, it did not resolve the situation brewing with my daughters and their father.

While Isla was far more vocal and outwardly displayed her resentment, Bree was more than likely feeling some of the same emotions as well.

They loved their father of that I had no doubts. It was those years of separation that affected them. He kept them at arms’ length, almost terrified of taking a larger role because of the distance. I wouldn’t have discouraged despite my personal feelings towards him at the time because at the end of the day he was the only father they had. I couldn’t nor would I ever replace him even if Peter and I had gotten married. I knew some parents did that when they remarried.

Perhaps in some cases, it was fine. A stepparent was sometimes more of a parent than the biological parent who’s role they were filling. Peter wasn’t comfortable overstepping his boundaries, nor was I comfortable with him taking a larger role in parenting my daughters. It wasn’t I didn’t trust him, but I couldn’t simply let him take over being their father. Jamie was there in his own way for them.

I heard the soft padding of Bree’s footfalls. It was easy to distinguish between the two as Bree’s were usually far louder than her sister, as if she had to announce her presence to everyone.

The knob on my door twisted and she made her way for my bed where she climbed in and cuddled against me.

“Ahh… Bree cuddles,” I murmured against her hair. I softly inhaled the sweet scent of my baby, although she wouldn’t remain that for much longer. She also wasn’t a baby anymore, but for so long she was my youngest.

She buried her face in my chest as if attempting to get closer to me. We’d been close before, but I definitely was ready for the day she left my womb. “Lovey, what’s wrong?” It was rare for her to go so long without talking and something was clearly bothering her.

When she lifted her head to finally look at me, I saw her eyes glisten with unshed tears. A sharp stab pierced my heart as it hit me I was failing at this whole parenting thing. It was simple when their needs were simpler. I had to feed, change, bathe, play, and put them to bed. I dealt with their nasty tantrums, and there were quite a few to be had when they were younger. Even currently, they still acted like toddlers and threw a fit. Isla demonstrated that particular feat earlier in the day.

I cupped her sweet, freckly face, rubbing my thumbs against the apples of her cheeks. “Please tell mummy what’s wrong, I can’t help if you don’t share.” She shook her head, a few tears falling loose. “I would rather know than have you crying.”

Her eyes were pensive and lines marred her forehead as she was deep in thought. I was growing more concerned by the minute as the silence continued. What was bothering her that she didn’t feel I could help her?
Her eyes met mine before she lowered them and licked her lips nervously. I noticed it was an action I did when I was anxious, and I had somehow passed it onto both of my daughters. “We-wel-well it’s j-j-just that…” her cheeks flushed and several more tears fell from those beautiful crystal blues. “You’re having a baby and you won’t love me anymore because you got someone new to fix it. You’ll love it more than me especially because you think I’m difficult and dramatic. And then all your attention will be on it,” she said with disgust, wrinkling her little nose. “You won’t even have time for us because of some stinky, crying baby.”

I didn’t have to be a psychic to know how she knew. Isla either purposely or accidentally told her sister about her future sibling residing inside of me. I was two for two with the reveals. Weren’t siblings supposed to be ecstatic at the prospect of an incoming child?? Yet, neither of my girls expressed the slightest interest. The chances were becoming remote that I could talk them around to excitement.

I had plenty of friends who had children after me, and their kids eagerly welcomed a new child into the fold. My girls were older, so I thought it would be even better. When they were younger, they asked for a baby brother for Christmas. It was the year I explained Gabriel to them, and took them to visit him for the first time. Also I had to give an impromptu, brief, not too informative lesson on where babies came from and why mummy or Santa couldn’t just give them a baby brother.

December 7, 2013

Isla was seven years old, and decided this was the year she would write her letter to Santa all by herself. It saddened me a bit to realize how much she was growing up and soon enough would no longer believe in Old Saint Nick. It was only a matter of time before she knew.

I counted my blessings it wasn’t this Christmas, and that I had another Christmas with their innocence fully intact. Isla also volunteered to assist Bree with her own list.

Bree was still learning how to write, but at least had all of her letters. They weren’t always the correct direction or in the right case, but she was improving with each day and would soon enough write her own letter as well. By then, I imagined Isla would no longer believe in those sorts of fairy stories. She already expressed a few doubts regarding how he circumnavigated the globe in a single night (her words, not mine.) I talked my way round the topic until she dropped it.

I finished up the final decorating details outside. We strung lights from our trees. I helped the girls tie a few red bows as well into the bare branches. We picked out a wreath together when we went in search of our tree.

The girls squealed and twittered about in the snow as I checked the trees for height and girth. We cleared out a space in our sitting room for the tree, and the girls set about decorating the lower branches. Isla had yet to reach four feet, but was perhaps half an inch away from claiming another foot. Bree was only two inches shorter than her sister. They’d always been fairly close in height and weight as Bree was on the higher end of the scale. People often thought they were the same age much to Isla’s displeasure.

After I finished with the outdoor decorations, I headed back inside to make a fresh batch of hot chocolate and check on the cookies in the oven. We already made gingerbread men and a gingerbread house from scratch. I didn’t believe in buying a kit when I could do it myself. Then we made chocolate chip, which were Bree and my mother’s absolute favorite. There was fudge cooling in the fridge. Our last cookies, the butter cookies were baking in the oven. We would bake more for Santa, but we had a lot of holiday functions to attend in the meantime.

The girls’ school held a brunch for parents and kids, then there was the Christmas pageant. The
kindergarteners put on their own holiday performance for family and friends. Not to mention, our church was holding an event. We were also invited to holiday parties between my friends and colleagues, and the girls’ schoolmates. It was going to be a busy holiday season for all of us, but I was looking forward to it.

After Christmas, the girls were flying out with their grandmother to visit their father for the New Year. It was agreed upon at the start of the school year, especially as I had to work every day from Boxing Day through New Year’s.

There were two weeks left until the girls went on break. They were already begging for me to take them to the cinema on the Saturday after they got out, so they could see Frozen (for the third time). My mother already took them, then a friend invited them. It was sort of unbelievable how much they adored the movie as it only came out two weeks previously.

I bought the album for them on iTunes and I was tiring of it quickly. Who knew something could repeat so many times? I wondered if my mother ever felt that way about my music. The Spice Girls were a constant in my bedroom. I also adored *NSYNC and the Backstreet Boys like every other preteen and teenaged girl in the 90s. My mum hadn’t realized how boy crazy I was until then.

I promised the girls as long as they behaved, we would make trip to the movies to see it. I hadn’t gone with them the first time because I was called in for an emergency surgery. I apologized profusely and my mother offered to take them instead. I was blessed to have her around to help.

As I took out the last cookie sheet, the girls came running in with their lists flapping in their hands. I smiled bemusedly at them because they were so adorable.

Bree’s hair fell in perfect ginger ringlets. They bounced with her every step. Isla’s hair had a slight wave and had darkened over the years to auburn instead of the strawberry blonde she had as an infant. They sported matching Christmas sweater dresses in navy blue because red would’ve clashed with their hair. There was a reindeer plastered on the front and the hem and sleeves were lined with snowflakes. A blue bow kept their pulled back from their faces.

“Okay mommy, we’ve got our lists for Santa.” Isla squealed, bouncing a little on her toes. Her sister giggled beside her, tiny teeth on display. She only had two permanent teeth, and hadn’t lost any other teeth yet.

“Present,” I laughed at serious she was taking it. I was also more than a little curious to hear what they wanted. Normally, their lists weren’t exhaustive, and when we visited Santa at the mall, they were quick and to the point.

Isla’s smiled widened, her two front teeth finally missing. She complained endlessly how unfair it was her sister lost them before her. “Alright mommy, so we both want an American Girl doll.” I was expecting that after the catalogue arrived and they’d been to several friends’ houses. “Then,” she paused and conferred with her sister through whispers before coming back to face me. “We want a baby brother.”

I froze at that particular revelation having not actually expecting it. They seemed perfectly content with only each other and never asked for another sibling in all of these years.

I felt like crying, but decided it was a perfect time to introduce them to their brother.

The next morning, I woke the girls earlier than normal. They were sleepy at the breakfast table with adorable confused expressions on their tiny faces as they drenched their pancakes in syrup. Bree swirled each bite of pancake in the sticky mess before bringing it to her mouth. I was already
prepared to wipe her face with a wet paper towel when she finished. Isla was content to take her
time, her head drooping every few minutes as sleep crept up on her.

We stayed awake longer than usual as we finished our decorating and baking. The girls dug out
their stockings from the basement. The previous year, they did their own DIY stockings. The
bought plain stockings and arts and crafts supplies from Michaels. Mel and I helped them
decorate it. Glitter decorated the terrace and during the summer, sparkles were seen when the
sun reflected just right. Bree chose a pink one and Isla blue. Their names specified which stocking
belonged to which girl, not that they were likely to forget their favorite colors. They also
purchased all sorts of Christmas type stickers from candy canes, penguins and igloos to reindeer.

The holidays were our favorite time to spend as a family besides the holiday we went on each
summer to the Vineyard.

The girls had mini trees in their rooms. They wanted to be more festive this year and took to
wearing Christmas colors regularly. Anything that was red or green in their closets was a huge
contender in their outfit of the day when they didn’t have school. I chuckled at some of their more
outrageous choices when they got home and changed their clothes. They raided our costume box
with its’ frilly skirts and feather boas.

Our Elf was also making an appearance around the house to “observe” the girls between
thanksgiving and Christmas. He sometimes had little surprises for the girls like chocolate or
stickers. The girls named him Fergus after asking their dad what were some Scottish names over
the phone.

They found him waiting for them at breakfast this morning with a letter.

Dear Isla and Bree,

Fergus told me you wanted a baby brother.

While I know how much you want one,
Santa is unable to give you one. It is
something only mommies and daddies
can do. I hope you still have a great
holiday season. You two have been
really good. I can’t wait to deliver
your presents.

-Love Santa

They were both visibly disappointed by the confirmation that Santa couldn’t get them a baby
brother. To them, Santa was a magical being that could do anything, but it was with a heavy
heart, they were learning how to deal with the fact that the jolly old man couldn’t do everything.

“I have something I want to show you today,” I told them as they finished the remnants of their
breakfast. Bree stuffed the last bite into her mouth as Isla nearly fell face forward into her syrupy
plate.

Isla blinked tiredly as she pulled her face up higher. The tips of her hair dipped into the pools of
syrup on her plate. I sighed at the realization I would have to wash her hair later to get it out. I had yet to let them take care of that particular action on their own as they tended to use either too much or too little shampoo. They rarely ever applied it to their entire head. The amount of conditioner they used was pathetic and left me struggling to brush the knots out of their hair.

“Where are we going mommy?” Isla yawned, her lips puckering.

I rubbed the top of her head. “Well you’ll have to get ready and I’ll take you. I’ve laid out clothes for you in your rooms.” They sluggishly pushed themselves back and out of their chairs before heading upstairs to get ready for the day. I cleaned the mess from breakfast and thanked my last minute decision to use paper plates. I wiped off my griddle and rinsed out my mixing bowl before storing it in the dishwasher.

I placed the syrup back in the pantry. The fruit went to the fridge along with the milk.

The girls arrived back downstairs fully dressed and ready to brace the bitter sting of winter’s cold. The temperature dropped significantly after Halloween. The girls had been wearing coats since early November along with stockings instead of tights to protect their legs from the cold. Boots usually adorned their feet and they brought tennis shoes for recess and P.E.

Isla still had a dazed expression, but she could sleep a little in the car. Bree was more awake but not by much as she followed her sister outside.

On the way to the cemetery, they fell asleep with their faces pressed against the window. Their tiny puffs of breath reacted against the cold window creating a foggy effect.

I followed the winding road passing by rows of headstones with their own mourners visiting. It was Saturday and the holiday season. There were more frequent visitors this time of year. I gently shook awake the girls.

Drool dribbled down Bree’s face and Isla’s hair stuck to hers. I couldn’t ask for anything better.

They were proficient at getting themselves out of their booster seats. They hopped out of the SUV and glanced around at our surroundings. Their brows wrinkled as it dawned on them, they were at a cemetery. I saw the questions building behind their eyes and decided it was finally time to talk about their brother.

I offered a hand to each of my daughters. They took it without a second thought and clung to me as we began walking to Gabriel’s spot. “Alright girls, mummy is going to tell you a true story.” They hung onto my every word as I explained to them why we were here and who we were here to visit.

Their eyes took in the sight of the stone. Each of them knelt in the ground and placed a kiss. They whispered things to their baby brother. “Sorry we wished for a new one,” Isla apologized to him. “You’re our brother even if you are in heaven.”

“We misses you a lot,” Bree chimed, wanting to add something. “I hope you get lots and lots of presents on Christmas since you isn’t with us.”

They took the news better than I thought they would. There were a few tears and questions of why as I explained to them the tale of their brother. “We will come back and see you soon.” They waved goodbye and played a rousing game of tag on the way back to the car. It began our tradition of visiting him every December and on his birthday, and on random days where we had nothing to do.

“Didn’t you want a baby brother?”
She rolled her eyes with contempt on her maturing face. “When I was five that was forever ago mommy. I’m almost ten. I don’t want to help take care of some stink bomb.”

I could only imagine what her friends with younger siblings shared with her over the years. “I’m not going to force you to help, but I would like it if you did.”

“Why?” I heard my five year old in her voice.

“Well this baby is going to need you. You had a big sister to be there and help you, and this baby will need one too. I can’t do it all by myself.”

I saw the contemplation, but I also saw the obstinance burning brightly like a candle in the dark. She wasn’t willing to compromise on the issue yet, but luckily there were seven more months where hopefully the idea of a brother or sister would grow on her. I hoped anyways. She was as pigheaded as they came and it was hard to change her mind.

“For now, you’re still my baby and I love you so much.” I felt more than heard her mutter against my chest, but couldn’t make out the words she said. I figured in her own time, she would share what went on in that brain of hers.

Sometimes I missed the simplicity of toddlers. They told me everything even if it was to say they pooped in their panties. It was all out there for me to know, but as they grew older, they kept their secrets closer to their chests.

Bree played with the hem of my t-shirt. Her long, dexterous fingers stroked at the material as I allowed her all the time she required. I wouldn’t force anything out of her because I had told her she was entitled to her own opinions and had privacy to an extent. Her breath was hot against my side, and her body was warm. I recalled sweaty toddler limbs as I tried to maneuver her to the other side of the bed. Somehow she always was back on top of me in the morning, so I eventually gave up on that endeavor.

“Time for dinner,” I announced at the sound of the timer on my phone.

She begrudgingly lifted herself from me and flung her body of the bed as she traipsed behind me down the stairs. It seemed I was going to have a little shadow again. I wasn’t entirely opposed to it because it had been so long since she willingly followed me around the house. She claimed she was much too old and usually walked at least three feet ahead with her sister when we went shopping.

I took the lasagna out of the oven and let it cool on the stove. The scent of the tomatoes, garlic, meat, and of course cheese lingered in the air, filling the kitchen with delicious smells. My stomach grumbled in response as I hadn’t eaten anymore than some fruit for breakfast. I was a fan of the homemade variety instead of store bought and frozen. There was nothing wrong with it if you didn’t have the time, but I didn’t want my kids relying on freezer food. Sometimes we froze our leftovers, but that was different.

I began slicing a loaf of bread to warm in the oven. Bree took out the salad ingredients and began to make our favorite salad. She carefully sliced the tomatoes and handled the basil leaves. Then she carefully arranged each plate almost painstakingly.

A frown popped up on those rosebud lips of hers and she glanced at me through the fringe of her eyelashes. “So mommy, is daddy coming? I know him and Isla got into a fight and stuff, but isn’t he part of the family? Does he have anyone to eat dinner with like us?”

I was gob smacked by her observation. While I was aware, Jamie didn’t have loads of friends, it
hadn’t occurred he was probably eating dinner alone. My heart thudded painfully against my chest because I sent him away. I thought it best if I were the one to discipline Isla, especially because she was galled at the notion of him having any direct authority of her punishments.

We were all in transition and working our way blindly through this reunification process. None of us knew what we were doing, but we weren’t trying our best at all. “Well darling, I imagine you’re right. How about if I call him and invite him? We can have a family meeting.”

Family meetings were rare and occurred when grievances needed to be aired in the open. It was usually a way for the girls to vent, but sometimes we dealt with serious situations like if there were conflicting schedules, whose event would I attend.

“We haven’t had one in a while,” she said as she grabbed another plate from the cabinet and set it down next to the others. When she finished her masterpiece, she whisked her vinaigrette ingredients before drizzling it over the salads. “Bon appetit,” she smiled impishly. I shook my head at her silliness. “I wish we could’ve had time to make bruschetta.” Bree loved tomatoes and basil.

“Perhaps, we will make a batch this weekend.” She was appeased for the moment. “I’m going to call your father. When the oven beeps, don’t forget to take out the bread.” She nodded her head as she began pulling glasses out of the cabinet.

I clicked his name and waited as the phone rang. “Hello?” He answered.

JPOV

I was more than a little annoyed when she told me it was best if I left for the afternoon. The girls were in adjustment and she herself was still trying to wrap her mind around everything happening. It was too fast and making her head dizzy.

For me, it felt like my head might explode because so much was going on all at one time. I don’t know how Claire managed the two of them all on her own. Isla carried so much inside of her, and reminded me heavily of her mother when she didn’t want to share her feelings. She had an explosive temper and an expansive vocabulary to access.

It gutted me to know my daughter thought so highly of me, note the sarcasm. I heard what she didn’t say and it left me feeling bereft. The ground came out from under me and I fell in a heap of my own mistakes and shortcomings. Her words sliced at half healed wounds and her aim was true. She held herself back in the wake of her destruction.

The day started out completely different. Claire and I saw our child, we heard the beginnings of a strong, steady heartbeat. We talked.

Then it all came crashing down when we noticed Isla was there and heard it all.

It was as if we betrayed her by creating a new life to love and nurture. I saw it in her eyes as she hurled her words. For her, we deceived her by not being forthcoming, but when was a good time to tell a child?

Half the time, Isla heard what she wanted to and it didn’t matter what I said. We tried to talk when she visited, but there was a coldness to her demeanor that I couldn’t penetrate. A deep freeze surrounded her and protected her from what, I couldn’t say, but if I had to guess it was me and the hurt I caused her by leaving. I remembered her begging me not to leave as I packed the remainder of my belongings and prepared to fly back to Scotland.
Even then her eyes flashed with betrayal and an unspoken hatred that if I left, she wouldn’t forgive me for the pain I was causing. She was as serious as almost three year olds could be, but I had told Claire from the beginning, there was an intelligence behind those dark eyes.

I tried not to feel the bitter sting of dismissal. There was a deep ache in the depths of my chest as she ushered me out without so much as a goodbye.

The lines of her face deepened and her eyes showed the stress she carried. I sighed and took my leave because I didn’t want to add to the turmoil she was experiencing. The key to this pregnancy was no stress. My presence contributed to more stress, and the last thing I wanted was for her to suffer another miscarriage. I knew we could survive it, but it was such an unbearable pain last time. Currently, we were running on hope and weren’t allowing any negative thoughts to penetrate the little bubble we formed for ourselves.

I stretched out on my sofa as soon as I returned to the emptiness of my apartment. I fully understood Claire’s hesitance to jump into a relationship. Time passed and we weren’t who we were nine years ago. We both made changes to our lives and had to slowly merge our lives together with the least amount of resistance.

It was only unfortunate when I opened the door to the loneliness. There weren’t shrieks of laughter or the thudding of feet against wood. It was silent. I drifted off, ignoring the hunger pangs in my stomach.

A few hours later, I woke to the sounds of my phone ringing. I fumbled for my phone and didn’t bother to look at the caller id before answering. “H’lo?” I mumbled.

“Jamie?” My heart clenched at the voice of my love. She sounded calmer than she had earlier when I left. I took a deep breath, letting it all flow out of me. “Everything okay Claire?”

I sensed her smile on the other end. “Oh yes, it’s fine. I was calling to inquire about your dinner plans.” She posed it the way she did for a specific reason. She was terrified I might reject her invitation to dinner, so if she made it sound as if she was curious and then I had no plans, I was more likely to be receptive to coming over.

I knew Claire and while bits and pieces of her changed there were some things that remained the same about her over the years. At her core, she was never one to put all of her fruit in one basket or lay out all the cards for everyone to see. She was cautious and kept her hand close.

“Are ye asking me to dinner?”

She snorted. “It’s hardly a date. I’ve made lasagna and we’ve got bread. Bree made a salad, and she wants you to come over for dinner. She thought you might be alone. We are also hosting a family meeting tonight.”

I didn’t hesitate before agreeing to their dinner invite. I knew it was a big step for me to attend a family meeting, and that there were things that needed to be discussed between the four of us. There were hard feelings and issues we brushed under the rug and ignored because it wasn’t apparent in the past. Here we all were in 2018, and we were finally on the same continent after so long.

I took my time cleaning up a bit and brushing my teeth because it wasn’t smelling all too great. Fifteen minutes later, Bree was letting me into the house. “Hi daddy,” she greeted, a smile on her
face. “Everything is all ready and we’ve been waiting on you.”

I followed her into the kitchen where the table was set. A Caprese salad was set out for each person, in the center of the table was a lasagna with just a touch of brown at the edges, and a serving plate with warmed French bread. When Isla was little, all she ever wanted to eat was lasagna. The leftovers were gone within two days because she ate it for every meal. I supposed not everything changes.

I took a seat opposite Isla who glowered at me. Bree sat next to her sister and Claire grinned beside me. Isla wasn’t the least bit talkative and focused on her food, but it was better than her tantrum earlier and storming out of the room because things weren’t going her way.

I hadn’t understood before what Claire meant when she said I hadn’t seen all the sides to them. There were parts I wasn’t familiar with and her attitude was one of them. She was almost twelve, her chemistry composition was changing and shifting constantly, and she never knew up from down.

I assisted Claire with the clean up, while the girls moved into the family room. “I’m sorry about making you leave. I have to constantly remind myself that I’m not alone in this parenting thing anymore.”

A warmth like the one when I had a good Scotch spread through my chest at her admission. “I dinna mind. It hurt. I canna say it didn’t.” She opened her mouth to apologize, but I cut her off. “I understand why ye did it. It’s a new situation for all of us, and it’s not just you or me adjusting but our daughters.” She placed a lid over the remainder of the lasagna and stored it in the fridge. “Her words were painful, but she’s entitled to her thoughts. She could’ve been more respectful in her delivery, but we can address that with her instead of yelling.” I saw her nodding in my periphery. “I think we let our tempers get the best of us, and we can all use some work on those whole family dynamic.”

Claire emitted a strand noise and covered her mouth. I realized she was trying not to cry. Her lips trembled as she awarded me with a watery smile. “No more tears,” I brushed away a stray one. “We’ve all cried enough to last several lifetimes. It’s not going to be easy, but I’m up to the challenge if you are.”

“Challenge accepted,” we went in search of our daughters. I mentally prepped myself for what was about to happen.

We were finally going to have a sit down talk and put it all out there. We couldn’t continue the way we were. It wasn’t fair to any of us.

Chapter End Notes

So food poisoning sucks but I already knew that from the last time. The toilet should never have to be your friend lol.
THANK YOU for your well wishes and concern. I'm feeling much better after water
and sleep.
Let me know what you guys think about this next step they’re about to take. I'm possibly looking at more than 40 chapters now. It seemed like a lot when I was on chapter 15, but I never seem to get as far as I'd like lol.
Chapter Notes

Hello lovely readers! For most of you, you should be asleep. For some, it's nearly halfway through the day. For me, it's 4 am. I shouldn't be awake, but when the muse calls to me I have to type. Also forgive me for any errors, I fix what I see as I go back and read when it's posted.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CPOV

Bree and Isla sat on the matching loveseat, staring wordlessly at us as we entered the room. They closed the curtains and turned on the lights in the room with the sun setting outside.

“Alright girls, you know how family meeting works.” I fixed each of them with a look because they had a horrid habit of breaking the rules when they weren’t getting their way.

They pasted on innocent smiles, but I saw through them easily. “List,” I told them.

In a monotone voice, they listed all of the rules. “No interrupting, no fighting, listen to everything someone says, no storming out, no yelling, and we don’t leave until we come to an agreement.”

The girls were aware of the rules and it took a few years to perfect them.

Our first family meeting happened when Bree was six and Isla eight. It was months before my mom moved out, and there was screaming and a meltdown.

“Good,” I clapped my hands and placed them on my thighs as I leaned forward. “Since we are clear on the rules, I expect we can get through this without either of you breaking them.”

There was some glowering and glaring coming from their side of the room, but I ignored it having grown immune to these sorts of displays over the years. After the first ‘I hate you’ these things lost their effect. Poor Jamie was having to catch up, and didn’t know quite enough to not let it bother him when the girls said hateful things.

Isla sat back and lifted a single brow as if giving me permission to move forward with the meeting. I didn’t need her permission to get anything started. I was already irritated with her behavior. Although, for her, she was already grounded.

“Let’s talk about the baby,” Jamie’s head snapped in my direction. I winced as I had forgotten he wasn’t aware of Bree’s status in our poorly kept secret. “It is true your father and I are expecting a baby. I’m about two months along, give or take a few days.” I wasn’t going to re-explain the intricacies of pregnancy. I would let them learn that in biology or however young people learned
Bree wrinkled her delicate nose. “Can you give the baby away?”

Jamie snorted beside me and covered his mouth to hide his laughter at the seriousness of her question. He thought she was joking, but I knew her well and she meant every word. “No Bree, we are keeping the baby. We will clean out my office and turn it into a nursery for the baby.”

“Why?”

“I kept you. I kept your sister. I know you don’t want this new baby, but we can’t change what’s already happened.”

She pouted and slumped into the cushion. It would take some time for her to adjust to the idea she no longer held the coveted position of baby in the family.

“While I understand it was the last thing you were expecting, I expect you both to help out. Further along in my pregnancy, there will be things I won’t be able to do, and I’ll need to rest more.”

“It means yer mam will require assistance around the house and you will take on more responsibility.” Isla’s cold stare landed on her father, and he stared back at her. I was glad he was learning to ignore her. She was looking for a reaction from him. “I’ll be around more often as well.” He took my hand and threaded our fingers together.

“Why?” Isla’s anger was thinly veiled. “Nothing stopped you from leaving us in the past.” I thought we’d moved on from this earlier in the day, but it was going to take time. She needed to see commitment and dedication from Jamie. He had to show up and just be there, otherwise she wouldn’t believe he was really intending on staying.

Jamie gritted his teeth to prevent himself from lashing out at his daughter. It didn’t help matters and wasn’t conducive to the environment of family meeting. She was provoking him. “Isla before I kent yer mother was pregnant, I was coming back to beg her for another chance.” The dubiouness was on her face, and it hurt to know she distrusted him. “I was a coward in the past.” He admitted to both of them. “I should’ve stuck around even if yer mam and I weren’t together. Instead I fled from my problems and took you guys for two months every year instead of being here. Ye’ve grown up without me around to discipline ye all this time.”

They hadn’t agreed nor disagreed with him, but he was clearly saying the right things because their attention was focused solely on him. “There’s a usurper that’ll take our attention away from the two of ye, and I get it.” His eyes were earnest and full of complete and utter devotion to his little lasses. How could they not trust that? It was part of the problem. Action not words meant far more to them.

He slid off the couch and crossed the room to them. He knelt before them and took one of their hands in his own. “I wish I kent all the words to say to make ye believe I’m not going anywhere, but I don’t. It’ll take time for ye to trust I’m going to stay. Nothing will make me leave again.” Bree’s eyes were clouded with indecision as she struggled to believe him. Isla’s held that deep seeded stubbornness of hers. She was a hard sell. “I didn’t come here for a baby, but for the three of ye. A baby was a surprise, but I dinna want ye to hate him or her.”

Bree’s eyes were fixed on her lap and her sister avoided my eyes. They were more than aware their feelings towards the baby were unfair. While it was okay to not know how they were feeling or not express outright happiness, it wasn’t right for them to be so quick to anger.
Things were going to change whether they wanted it to or not. It was how life operated, and I would rather them have the skills necessary to cope with change than to manifest unhealthy methods for dealing with it. I never wanted them to feel afraid for what they are feeling, but all of us are struggling.

“Do ye honestly believe I’ll love this new baby more than my fair lasses?”

They shook their heads, but still refused to make eye contact. “Do ye think it’s going to change how much I love the both of ye?”

A tiny, mumbled ‘no’ came from their lips. “I’ll love ye all equally, and it may be hard in the beginning to balance a newborn and my two almost grown up girls,” I winked at them. “But I am willin’ to try anything because I love you so much.”

**JPOV**

Bree threw herself into my arms, her hot tears on my neck. Isla wasn’t far behind her sister. I kissed their heads, inhaled the sweet scent of their shampoo, and rubbed their backs.

Females were a mystery to me. I had known Claire for over fifteen years and she was still a puzzle most of the time. I wasn’t sure it was one I was meant to understand, but it was turning out our daughters were the same way. I whispered softly into their ears words of comfort and love because more than anything I wanted them to come away with knowing how much I loved them even when they were being bratty.

“Alright, girls that wasn’t the only things we wanted to discuss with you.” I pulled back at the sound of Claire’s voice.

I gave them each a pat and moved back to the couch. “I know it has been quite stressful and insane, but it doesn’t give you the right to speak to us disrespectfully.” Bree’s face was full of contrite, but her sister was the opposite. “Your father and I truly understand. It isn’t easy for us transitioning either, however we are the adults.” She waved her hand between our bodies. “I treat you with respect. I expect the same courtesy in return. You aren’t little children so I fully expect you to know what I mean.”

“Yes ma’am,” they said.

Claire wasn’t done with them yet. “It is alright to get mad. Everyone does. The problem is when you take it out on other people. In that moment, it is your intention to hurt their feelings because you want them to feel as bad as you do.” Isla refused to look up, knowing exactly who this part of the conversation was directed at. “I was your age once, believe it or not, and I’ve had my share of rows with my mother.”

Yes, I was privy to more than a fair few of those. The girls had nothing on a seventeen year old Claire. It was probably where her endless patience derived.

“I said some nasty things to her,” or a lot, “but at the end I apologized and she accepted because for the most part I was sorry. I love her, and she’s done so much for me. It gets frustrating at times, I know.” She placed her hand over her heart, her eyes beseeching. “I don’t want you to say something you don’t mean one day and realize how awful it made you feel. The sad truth about words is you can’t take them back.”

We exchanged a look because we discovered that particular truth years ago when too many things were said between us. I wish so much I could take back some of the hurtful things I told her when I was too mad to think or act rationally. I know she felt the same way. I knew one day our
daughters would learn the same life lesson, but I didn’t want it to be any time soon.

There was something completely devastating about it. It was another chip at the innocence of your childhood when everything was fixed with a simple apology. Kids brushed off mean acts with a smile in place, and were ready to move on within minutes.

It was when a person discovered words had value and it was either good or bad that an apology almost became meaningless. They weren’t entirely apologizing for their actions or words, but in a way to relieve themselves of the guilt rolling inside of them. To make amends, a person had to accept they would never be fully absolved of their crimes and forgiveness only extended so far.

In a way, Isla and Bree experienced this concept, but on a smaller scale they weren’t fully conscious of yet. They were leery and not entirely trusting of my decision to stay here with them. Experience taught them I had a history of leaving when it was too hard. In a sense, they were jaded. I could apologize for the rest of my life, but in the end they would never forget all of the birthdays, games, recitals, and school events I missed over the years. It was the reality in which we lived.

“Do you understand?” She asked, her eyes searching the girls’ faces.

Bree furrowed her brows. A divot formed in the middle as if there was something she was confused about. “Can’t you just apologize and say you didn’t mean it?” I yearned for innocence and internally cried at the idea of her one day shedding it like an old skin.

Claire glanced quickly at me, and I knew she was going to say something to appease Bree for fear she might ruin her positive vision of the world. She didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize the innocence that radiated from our girl. There was a purity untainted by corruption and the need to grow up, and while she certainly was jaded about some things in her life, Bree saw the world differently than most people. At least that was my opinion.

“Well sweetheart,” it almost sounded patronizing to me. “In certain cases, perhaps an apology does work. However, do you remember how Carrie Smith picked on you in second grade?” My head turned so fast, I felt the tenderness in my neck. She never mentioned another child bullying our daughter. “Have you forgiven her even after she apologized for stealing your backpack and leaving a trial of your belongings across school? Or any of the other mean things she did?”

What the hell? What kind of school was she sending them to? Is that the sort of things children did for fun? If so, I was definitely going down to the school to speak to the headmaster because that was unacceptable.

“Ugh,” Isla groaned as she brushed a hand across her forehead. “If you had let me take care of the little punk, it could’ve been fine.”

Claire glared at our eldest. “Not everything is solved with a fist. Regardless, Bree you didn’t answer my question.”

“No,” she replied. “I’ve never really thought about it.” She admitted, her eyes a bit watery and glistening like two clear pools. “I don’t want to think I could’ve hurt someone’s feelings and they won’t forgive me.” A sob escaped her lips and Isla snapped out of her bratty attitude to comfort her sister.

“It’s okay Bree. You’ve never done anything super mean in your life. I promise.” Bree sniffled against her shoulder. “Mom just mean sometimes people do things that just go beyond what a person is capable of forgiving and in the end, an act is unforgivable.”
Isla had a way with her sister, and I was proud of her for taking the initiative to explain it to her. She was more than a moment of brattiness or anger. There were all of these parts unexplored, and I wanted to know as many as possible.

The family meeting sort of dissolved from there as Bree took a position on Claire’s lap. Normally, I would’ve suggested she was too old, but I sensed they needed the closeness. Isla then decided to bring out family movies. Most of them were after I went back to Scotland, but there were some from before I left.

“Ooh I know, let’s start with Bree’s first day of school.”

The screen started out blank and then I noticed the date. September 5, 2014. Bree was five years old at the time. Claire held her back a year because she didn’t think she was ready.

*On the screen, Bree had two pigtails with blue ribbons and wore a miniature version of the jumper she wore to school now. She had glossy Mary Janes on and frilly socks. She was missing two teeth on the bottom, but her two top teeth were already in as she lost them the previous year.*

*There was a pout on her cherub face. The rosebud lips were downturned as she swung her head back and forth. “Bree?” I recognized the voice as Claire’s. “Are you ready for your first day of kindergarten?” She shook her head. Her face was red and her eyes wet. “Why not?”*

“I don’t wanna go to school,” she wailed, throwing herself onto the floor. Her limbs went every which way as she pounded the floor with her fists and scuffed the floor with her feet.

*Isla appeared before the camera. Her hair was done in two braids. She was starting third grade. “Bee, school is so fun. You get to learn the alphabet and numbers. There’s story time.” She was missing several teeth as well. There was a slight lisp. “You’re teacher is super nice too.”

*Bree was inconsolable, and I looked at the older version who had her head tucked into her mother’s shoulder in mortification.*

“Na uh,” she protested immediately. “I’m not going to make any friends. No one is going to like me.”

*Isla disagreed and told her how she thought the same way, but made some of her bestest friends on the first day. “Then there’s recess. You get to play outside, but only when it’s warm and not raining. If it gets too cold, we play inside.”*

*Bree halted her movements, a few sniffles escaping her, as she sat up and her face was in view again. There was some snot dripping from her nose that she wiped with her fist. Her little blue eyes teary.*

“Gross,” Bree muttered. “I swear you pick this one because of how embarrassing it is.” Isla smirked and batted her lashes playfully at her sister. Bree stuck her tongue out.

*Her cheeks were flushed and strands of hair were stuck to her wet face. “Ugh,” I heard Claire behind the camera. “Bree, mommy just cleaned you and made you all pretty for school. Let’s go to the kitchen so I can at least wipe your face and fix your hair.” Claire handed the camera to Isla as she hefted Bree onto her hip.*

*They went to the kitchen, the camera moved a lot as Isla followed behind her mother and sister. The kitchen was quite different from its' present look. The walls were an austere white and the cabinets were a different color as well. There was even a different table shown in the background.*
Claire grabbed a paper towel and splashed some water onto it before gently wiping Bree’s face and hands. “You’re going to love school. You already have a friend who is in your class. Remi and her mommy are going to meet us outside, but we’ve got to get going if we are to be on time.”

Bree’s eyes held her terror, but she slowly nodded. Claire grabbed the camera back from Isla as the girls gathered their school bags and lunches. “Nana is going to pick you up from school at the end of the day. I promise it’ll all go perfect.”

From the expression on her face, I knew Bree was doubtful of her mother’s prediction. The screen went black and then picked up at the front of the school. I recognized the building from Bree’s first day of fourth grade.

Isla waved and blew a kiss to her mom. “See ya tonight mommy,” she called as she ran ahead to some of her friends. The camera caught the back of her red braids swinging as she trotted merrily into school, her laughter carrying in the air.

“Bree!!” A small voice squealed happily as a body collided with my baby girl. Bree stumbled slightly in surprise, but I saw Claire’s hand hold her for balance.

Bree pulled back, a big grin forming on her face at the sight of her friend. I recognized Remi. Her hair was blonder and half of it was in a ponytail. She wore the same uniform as the other little girls. “Remi,” there was a hint of relief in Bree’s voice at the arrival of her friend.

Remi waved at Claire. “Hi Auntie Claire,” she greeted, tiny teeth on display. “Are you making a video for the first day?”

“Yes, it is a huge day. You two are starting kindergarten.”

“I can’t wait to get smarter.”

At the confidence her friend displayed, I saw Bree draw from her. If her friend could do it, Bree would too. “Me too mommy, we are going to get so smart.”

I chuckled at her words, and winked to the older version of the little girl.

“Gosh Bree, if I had known all it took was Remi, I wouldn’t have even bothered.” Isla teased her sister. “I told you all the perks, and you still didn’t believe it would be fine.”

“Well you’re my older sister, why should I believe you? You told me there were gift eaters who ate the presents of the youngest child.”

I gaped at the proud smirk on Isla’s face, having never previously heard about gift eaters. What sorts of pranks did she play on her sister?

Isla snickered into her hands as she tried to keep a straight face. Bree was obviously still holding a grudge about it. “Mom found you sleeping on the couch to keep watch of the presents.”

“Yes, don’t remind me.” Claire shook her head in remembrance. “You had your sister completely convinced she would have no presents. She cried as I put her back to bed, and I had to comfort her and promise they would be there in the morning for her to open.”

Goodness, Claire had her hands full with these two. “That wasn’t very nice of ye,” Isla shrugged. “Did ye at least apologize to her?”

“Yes, mom made me the next morning tell her it was a joke. Bree held a grudge for the rest of the day.”
“Rightly so! I was so scared and peed the bed.”

“I forgot that was during your bed wetting phase.” Isla said. “Bree peed the bed for like six months in kindergarten. The month leading up to school starting and all the way past Christmas. Mom couldn’t figure it out. Bree wasn’t allowed liquids an hour before bedtime and mom made her use the toilet right before bed. Then it stopped.”

Bree was red faced. “It was the nightmares. Then I was nervous. I drank so much water because I was always thirsty. It’s fine now.” She assured me, her face flushing a deeper red. It was clearly still a source of mortification all these years later.

The video continued to play on the screen. I watched as my tiny girl entered her classroom, found her cubby and desk. It was strange to see Brianna instead of Bree, but mostly because we rarely used her first name.

“Mommy, look my desk is right next to Remi,” Bree pointed, jumping up and down excitedly. Claire helped her put her pencil box in her desk. They took out all of her other supplies and placed them on the desk. Her name was written in black marker on all of them. They put Bree’s backpack in her cubby, and it finally was time for the goodbyes. In the background, other parents were hugging their impossibly small children.

It was unfathomable to think she was once that small. She glanced nervously around the classroom at the other kids before focusing on her mom.

She bit her top lip. “Oh Bree, please no don’t cry. It’s going to be great. Soon enough you won’t want to come home from school, and your old mum will be all sad.” Bree giggled in that childlike way. The sound was light and airy and complete music to my ears.

“Give mummy a kiss,” Claire set down the camera. Their heads were slightly cut off as they hugged and kissed. Bree’s fingers tightly grasped the material of Claire’s blouse as her mother tried to pull away to leave. “Come on sweetheart, mummy has to go to work.” Bree shook her head rapidly, burrowing herself further into her mother’s embrace. “If you do this, I’ll take you out for ice cream.”

“Claire!” I was shocked by this blatant display of bribery. She always lectured me about bribing the girls when we spoke on the phone. It was easier sometimes.

She shrugged and smiled impishly as if to say ‘if it works, it works’.

Bree’s demeanor brightened immediately at the prospect of ice cream. “Promise?” She held out a tiny pinky for her mother to shake.

“I promise. I love you so much.” Claire kissed her fiery hair and grabbed one last shot of Bree as she took her seat at her desk. Remi was beside her, and it looked like it would all work out.

The video ended. Claire paused the disc. “So did ye get ice cream?” I asked Bree. I was curious about how her first day went.

“Oh yeah, mommy took me on her next day off.” There was something resigned in her tone. “She worked really long shifts then.”

I quirked an inquisitive brow at Claire, but she gave me a look that said we would talk about it later. I knew it was an intensive program where residents logged far too many hours, which was why Julia made her way across the Atlantic to assist her daughter in raising her own daughters. I wondered just how much time Claire was unable to spend at home because she was training.
Claire clicked play on the disc. It was a smiley Bree, her hair having fallen loose over the course of the day. The bangs carefully clipped back into her pigtails were in her face.

“Hello love,” I recognized the voice as Julia Beauchamp. “Well let’s have a look at you, you look like you’ve had a wonderful day.”

If possible, the cheesy grin on her face widened, almost to the Cheshire cat capabilities. “Oh yes, I had so much fun nana. We had recess and I played four square and tag. I also made a lot of new friends. There’s Reagan, Sofia, and lots of other people too. And I sit next to my bestest friend Remi.” The excitement was evident in her voice. Her eyes sparkled a vibrant hue of blue as she regaled her grandmother with tales of her first day.

“I’m glad your day was full. Let’s wait for your sister.” Isla took her time coming out of the building, but finally she was there, her hair perfect as ever.

She casually exchanged goodbyes with her friends as she made her way over. “Hi nana,” she said as if it were any other day, which I supposed for her it was. She was in her fourth year of school at that point. “What’s for dinner?”

I chuckled at her. It was almost as if she didn’t care it was the first day. It was routine for her by then, and she knew nothing truly special occurred that day. It was the start of another school year, but on the first day it was getting to know the students, back to school activities, and putting away supplies.

Julia tugged on one of her braids affectionately. “How was your day? I’m recording this for your mum.”

Isla rolled her eyes good naturedly. “It was fine. My teacher is cool. We picked our own desks, and we get to write on them during math with erase markers. There’s also a new kid in the grade.” Her bag hung off her shoulders. It was some sort of flowery design, while I saw Frozen on Bree’s. “We have homework too. It’s some math stuff so she can place us in math groups.”

“You’ll do it as soon as we get home,” her grandmother ordered her. “I know how you put it off, but if you would do it when you get home, then we wouldn’t be running late in the morning waiting for you to finish.”

There was irritation on her young face, but she took the scolding. “Alright, your mother won’t be home until at least nine tonight so you might not have a chance to talk to her about the day.”

The longing and disappointment in their eyes gutted me. “Yes nana,” they said sadly.

“That ended on more of a sour note than I was anticipating,” Claire announced beside me. A sleepy nine year old was cuddled in her lap, but Bree would fight until the end.

It wasn’t her bed time yet, which she would argue endlessly. They both weren’t sent to bed until 9:30, which was lights out. By 10, they were supposed to be sleep in their beds.

Bree murmured sleepily, I could only imagine the extra heat she emanated because I knew she was a furnace when sleeping. Her sweaty limbs pushed and thwacked me in my sleep when I allowed her to sleep in my bed when she was younger and terrified to be away from home. “… and Wendy?”

I missed most of her question to Claire who agreed to whatever our daughter asked her. “Why don’t you head up to your room and I’ll be up in a bit to start?” She patted Bree’s backside to get her going as she was sluggish in her movements. Her eyes weighed down by her tiredness. She
clumsily made her way down the halls, stumbling into the wall more than once. “Be careful sweetheart,” her mother called out to her.

Isla took the disc out of the player and put it back into its’ case. “Can I join too mom?” She pushed out her bottom lip and enlarged her eyes.

“When have I ever told you no?”

The eleven year old frowned. “All the time but okay. I’ll go change.” She disappeared instantly. I heard her feet on the stairs and the creak of the wood as she made her way to her room.

Doors opened and closed as the girls prepared for bed.

I was genuinely confused about what was happening. “Claire?”

She turned as she finished folding the blanket. “Yes?”

“What is happening?”

She laughed at me as she explained story time. “It started on the nights I had off. The girls picked a chapter book, child appropriate,” she added for clarity. “I would read to them, usually in my bed since it was the biggest at the time. Now we usually convene in Bree’s. Right now we are making our way through Peter and Wendy, which they love. Our last book was Alice in Wonderland.”

She halted her steps, and trepidation crossed her face as she stared at me. Her eyes dropped before making eye contact with mine. “Do you want to join?”

“Yes,” I said. It was a tradition of theirs, and she was extending a branch to me to immerse myself. The girls would only view my status here as permanent the more I interacted with their every day lives.

A smiled graced her lips, transforming her face immediately. She radiated beauty and glowed. Her features were iridescent, her eyes brighter, her hair more luminous, and her skin clear and creamy with a slight flush. “Come on then, I can’t keep them waiting all day.”

I followed her as I knew I would follow her anywhere as long as the fates and god would allow. I had let her go in the past without a fight, but I knew this was where I belonged.

The girls were snuggled up in Bree’s bed with the book sitting between them. Their eyes tracked me as I made my way into the obscenely pink room. It grew on me as I pictured my little red headed nine year old spending her days in here. Her school clothes were laid out for the next day.

Claire finally arrived a few minutes later, her face freshly scrubbed, her hair tied into a knot, and in her sleep clothes consisting of a tank and pajama bottoms. She crawled into the bed, snuggling close to Bree. Isla shyly glanced at me and gestured for me to join them in the bed for family story time. I did as she bade.

“Chapter 4, the flight,” the girls were hanging onto every word. “Second to the right, and straight on till morning. ‘That Peter had told Wendy, was the way to Neverland; but even birds, carrying maps and consulting them at windy corners, could not have sighted it with these instructions.’”

Her voice was soft, although she inflected at the necessary parts. She gave the characters life, and the girls were mesmerized. I saw the magic and adoration in their eyes. “And so, bewildered, and now staggering in her flight, she followed Tink to her doom.”[1]

She softly closed the book and glanced down at our slumbering children. They fell asleep during the last two pages after fighting sleep the whole chapter through, but they couldn’t resist the lulling
tones of their mother’s voice as she read to them. I could hardly resist them myself, and found myself a bit drowsy as well.

She held a finger to her lips as she slid out of the bed with practiced ease, not stirring either of our children. I wasn’t nearly as careful, and Isla turned over as I left the bed. I tucked the comforter closer around her and then exited the room after Claire.

She glanced in the room one last time before shutting the door. There was such a fondness on her face. Everything was lighter about her, and I knew she enjoyed and relished that time as well. It was obviously special to all of them. It was a coveted time where there were no outside forces pulling them apart, only the love and affection they had tying them together.

“So that’s story time, we try to do it once or twice a week.” She led me into her bedroom, which was a little less immaculate than the last time I saw it. A pile of clothes adorned the floor, and the books weren’t quite straight on her nightstand.

“Ignore the mess,” she said as she pulled back the comforter. “Anyways, I gathered the impression you wanted to talk.”

I did. I sat on the edge of her bed, not wanting to infringe on her personal space. “So how many hours were you averaging a week during your residency?”

She drew back and flinched guiltily. “Well it depends. My first year, I probably averaged ninety, but in my last few years, it was much closer to a hundred twenty.” Which implied that there were only forty-eight hours a week she wasn’t logging in at the hospital. “I know, I know,” she said almost immediately, defending herself before I could even launch an accusation. “It’s why I needed my mother. At the end of my residency, she moved out. While my hours during my fellowship weren’t that flexible, I managed my schedule a bit better. For things like games and recitals, I had to put in to get the time off, and it all depended on if someone else already had.”

I wasn’t here to chastise her, or punish her for unavailability. She was present and tried her best. Besides, it seemed as if she punished herself more than I ever could. I pulled her into my arms to comfort her. “I’m not mad. I understand and knew beforehand you would be logging a lot of time at the hospital. There wasn’t anything to be done about it.”

“I still feel terrible when I think about the things I missed.”

“Not nearly as much as me, and you’re fantastic. Ye took them on holidays, and ye made time for the first day of school. Ye canna blame yerself. Ye’re around for them now, and I see how much effort you put into being available if they need ye. Dinna ever think ye aren’t doin’ enough for them.”

While she wasn’t perfect because no one truly was, she came fairly close to achieving it with her unwavering devotion to our children. “So how did it go with Isla earlier?”

I transitioned the conversation, not wanting to linger on the topic any longer. It still weighed far too heavily on her, and I didn’t want any sadness or darkness hanging on the edges of our life.

“Yes, she wasn’t too happy about her punishment.” We discussed a few options, but Claire ushered me out before anything concrete could be decided. “I gave her a month’s grounding and took her phone away for an indeterminable amount of time.” I tried to advocate on Isla’s behalf for two weeks, but Claire said it wasn’t the first time she got into a fight.

There was apparently one near the end of the school year with another girl that played the violin. They were rivals and opposed each other, and it ended in a confrontation after school. “She’s a
good kid, truly,” Claire wanted me to know. “She’s just accustomed to being the smartest in the room and hates to be challenged by those she doesn’t view as her equal. It can be an issue with those who have higher IQs. She’s not the most social person either.”

“How do ye mean?” I asked her. It was hard to measure that sort of thing in comparison with her sister who seemed to make a friend within minutes.

Claire made herself comfortable and forced me next to her. “She’s had difficulty making friends in the past. It was another contributing factor for looking into other schools. Newton works hard at developing relationships between the girls and fostering skills like teamwork. She’s selective about who she lets in, but when she does, she’s such an amazing kid.”

She didn’t have to sell our daughter to me because I knew that the moment, she pulled herself up at nine months and started toddling around the apartment. There was no crawling. She skipper that step and went for running. She sat patiently and watched, and if she had to go somewhere, she waited for someone to carry her. She waited her time until one night when Claire arrived home from her study group, Isla grew excited at the sight of her mom, pushed herself up and crossed the floor on unsteady legs to her mom. I caught a few seconds on camera as I’d been attempting to get her to crawl at the very least.

She also picked up sign language easily and could communicate her basic needs by eight months. Her favorite sign was the one for dad much to Claire’s chagrin. She was ready to take on the world and find out what it had to offer her. “She’s been bright.”

“Yes, sometimes I wonder what all of that intelligence gets her. I want her life to be more than school and facts. It’s why I put her in so many things. I don’t want her like other child geniuses where as soon as they’re discovered, they’re singled out. I never had her tested because I don’t want her to be defined by a number.”

She hadn’t said anything I disagreed with so far because it was true many people who identified as gifted or savants had all these issues with socialization, depression, and a host of other problems. Some people rarely saw beyond their talents, and they felt misunderstood. There was a lot of pressure placed on them to succeed. I shuddered imagining my little girl like them.

I hugged her close. “She’s receiving a good education, and doesna seem to mind the curriculum. Ye’ve done a wonderful job with her. She’s well adjusted and aside from some teen angst, she’s a good girl.” My lips pressed to her hair of their own accord. I couldn’t keep my hands off of her, but it wasn’t in a sexual way I wanted her. I definitely desired her, but most of all I missed the intimacy of nights spent curled in bed around one another. “I’m sure ye’ve done yer research.” Her silence provided me my answer. “I think she will be fine. Has she expressed an interest in a career?”

She hadn’t told me anything since the ruminations of a five year old admitted to wanting to be a princess or a mermaid. I encouraged her to dream and explore the depths of her imagination even when she was at her most serious. It didn’t always work, and sometimes she refused to indulge in made up things, calling them childish and silly.

“Last I heard, she wants to attend either Caltech or MIT for aerospace engineering. Lofty, but she’s determined.” I felt her smile against my chest as I traced shapes on her back. “I sort of hope she chooses MIT so she isn’t far.” I snorted, my body shaking a little at the force. “I know, but I would miss her too much. Eventually, she would like to work for NASA.” She was an ambitious lass.

“What has our other young lass said about her future aspirations?” I knew they were both intelligent and strived for good grades.
She chortled. “Oh she wants to be an engineer as well. According to her, numbers were the best and always made sense. She’s not interested in space like her sister. MIT is the only school she’s ever thought about.” It was hard to believe at nearly ten years old, Brianna knew what she wanted to do. I struggled to decide even during my A-levels. “It’s because on career day, someone’s parent was an engineer. The girls talked with them endlessly and discovered there were all sorts of engineers. Isla decided two years ago and Bree this past year.”

It was incredible any child would automatically decide to be an engineer, but some kids knew at a young age exactly what they wanted out of life. “What do ye want for them?”

“To live whatever life they’d like. If they’re happy, I can’t complain. It could change,” her tone suggested she thought otherwise. We were both hyper aware they were singular minded people, even when it seemed as if Bree flitted from one thing to the next.

“I thought Bree wanted to be a football star.” Claire cackled delightfully at my statement. “Sassenach, I dinna get the joke.” I tickled her sides and she squirmed against me, trying to escape my wandering fingers.

“She likes football and intends to play in university, but I don’t see her pursuing it as a career. She tells people that because she doesn’t want to embarrass herself by admitting what she really desires. A lot of people can be more than a little patronizing and condescending to a nine year old who expresses an interest in engineering.”

There were certainly people who never thought Claire could be a surgeon, but she proved them wrong. “I think it’s a great idea. They could change the world.”

She playfully smacked my chest, but didn’t disagree with my assessment. “If anything, I’m glad they stopped wanting to be a princess. It’s hard to explain to a six and four year old why they can’t be a princess when they grow up, or my favorite raise unicorns. There’s also when Bree completed her first When I grow up assignment. She told her teacher she wanted to be like me. She drew a picture of me with a knife, although it was supposed to be a scalpel and a body with lots of blood. Needless to say, I sent a note to school explaining I wasn’t a serial killer but a surgeon.”

I laughed and asked her if she kept it. She admitted it was in a memory box in her closet. “It was mortifying,” she groaned, which soon turned into a yawn.

I rubbed her back, her body relaxed into sleep. “Thanks,” she breathed, the warmth seeping through my shirt.

“For what?”

“Being you.”
Chapter End Notes

So strange enough, I hadn't realized I switched characters povs. I just transitioned and then saw I hadn't designated where Jamie took over. Anyways let me know your thoughts, and guys 4 more days until I'm 23. That's unbelievable. There's going to be a time jump next chapter. We are going to catch up with our little family in the middle/end of October. Everything isn't entirely resolved, but for now they've worked out something to work for them. See you then!
HAPPY BIRTHDAY

Chapter Summary

It's October!

Chapter Notes

So as I said last chapter, we are skipping ahead to October. I'm also more into giving than receiving so on my birthday here's a gift you guys for being so freaking awesome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JPOV

I stared at my calendar uncomprehendingly because surely it couldn’t be right.

October 19 glared back at me, and I found myself deeply saddened by it. Today was Isla’s twelfth birthday, and in a year she would be embarking on her journey into her teenage years.

I recalled without the slightest effort the day she came into the world far too early, but completely and utterly perfect. I fell in love with her the moment I saw her.

She was too tiny, but that hardly mattered because Claire and I had brought life into the world. She was a blend of our DNA and love, and she survived not because we willed it so; but because she was a true survivor.

Isla came off her grounding two weeks earlier than originally intended for good behavior. While there were still some tense moments when I felt completely out of place, we working on the family bit.

The weather began cooling a few weeks ago as we transitioned from summer to autumn. Bree was tasked with raking the leaves, but not before she jumped into piles of them. She didn’t care if there were any bugs at all as she created huge mounds of crispy leaves. Her laughter and joy carried into the open windows of the house each time I was there.

Claire and I weren’t any closer to figuring out our situation with her constantly working. My job had picked up recently as well, and I was left with less time than before with my family. The girls were fully immersed into school and their afterschool activities.

Every Thursday and a few Wednesdays as well, Isla had a field hockey game. Bree had a tournament at the end of September, which I attended with her. Her team didn’t win, but Bree saw it as an opportunity for them to improve themselves and work on their skills and teamwork. I was immensely proud of her for not dwelling on the negative side of things.

On this particular Friday, Claire requested the day off and I took it off as well. We were on our way to pick the girls up from school early for a surprise. We were going to spend the entire
weekend together as a family.

We already informed Bree’s coach she wouldn’t be attending the game on Saturday. We didn’t want to inconvenience anyone, but we thought it would be nice to take the girls somewhere for the weekend as we celebrated Isla’s birthday.

I parked the car in the lot as Claire and I got out of her SUV. After the girls left for school this morning, we packed their clothes and loaded the car. We planned the trip three weeks ago as we debated about what to do for her birthday. The following weekend, she was having a small party with her friends, but this one was just for us. We didn’t have many left before she was out of the house and living her own life.

This was also the last year we would be a family of four, and next year there was going to be another life form demanding our attention.

My eyes dropped to Claire’s stomach as she was starting to show a little. She was over the three month mark, and we started to tell friends and family members. She was also complaining because her clothes weren’t fitting as much. In her pregnancies with our daughters, she hadn’t started to show until at least the fourth month, but she was older now than she was then. I tried explaining that to her until I saw the iciness of her glare and kept my mouth shut. She wasn’t to be trifled with in her second trimester.

She wore a pair of jeans that miraculously still fit (thank heavens) and a loose fitting blouse with a jean jacket over it. The blouse was a forest green color, which contrasted nicely with her pale skin. She wore comfortable sneakers. Her hair hung in loose waves down her back.

I threaded our fingers together as we made our way inside the school. The secretary in the office smiled kindly when saw us. “I’ll call Brianna down, just sign her out.” She said as she began to dial the number for her classroom.

Claire wrote out her name, the time and date, and then signed her initials. A few minutes later, I heard our girl as she made her way down the hall. A smile blossomed on her face when saw us. Her backpack was full as we informed her teacher earlier in the week, she wouldn’t be back until Wednesday. She was curious about why she needed all of the work and voiced it to us as well, but we kept our lips shut not wanting to spoil the surprise. Also it was well known in the family if you told Bree something, everyone would know within hours.

“Aw come on,” she said as she continued her persuasive argument. We pulled in front of Isla’s school.

“I’ll be right back Sorcha,” I tenderly stroked her face and left her to Bree’s inquisition.

I had been inside the building a few times since the start of the school year. The parents were very involved, I discovered which meant I was too. The office was empty when I entered so I dinged the bell. I waited several more minutes before a woman of average height with light colored hair appeared. She looked extremely harried and annoyed, but that wasn’t my issue.

“Can I help you sir?” Her tone was snappish, but I allowed it.

I simply wanted to sign out my daughter so we could get on our way. “Yes, I’m here to pick up my daughter.”

A flash of irritation crossed her face. “Name?”

“Isla Fraser, she’s in seventh grade.”
I heard the clicking of her keyboard as she typed Isla’s name into the system. “I’ll need to see some I.D. of course.” I opened my wallet and took out my identification card. She slid it across the counter space and scrutinized the picture before handing it back to me. “Fill out the blanks in the green binder, and I’ll call her out of class.”

It took a little longer for Isla to appear. She was confused, but surprised nonetheless by my appearance. “Dad?” She asked as I shouldered her bag.

She was in her gym clothes. I realized she hadn’t had the opportunity to change. She would survive. I hugged her to my side as we exited the school. Her brows knitted together when she noticed her mom and sister waiting for us in the car. “What’s going on?” She asked, sliding into the backseat.

“It’s a surprise,” Claire replied, a tiny smile on her lips. Apparently, our daughters lacked the patience to wait. They begged for the first hour of our drive until the backseat settled into silence. It was then I noticed, they fell asleep.

According to Claire, they were awake past midnight last night so they could celebrate Isla’s birthday. Our daughter graced the world with her presence at 1:32 am.

She didn’t want to miss the exact minute she turned twelve and Claire indulged her. She pretended she was stern and strict, but she compromised fairly often.

Wisps of Isla’s hair fluttered in the autumn breeze floating through the car because soon enough there would be frost and frigidity in the air. Isla slept with her head on her sister; I wanted to capture the moment to freeze it for all time.

Claire apparently was of the same mind as her phone was open to the camera. I heard the click as she took a few pictures. “Sometimes it makes me nostalgic of when they were younger. The car lulled them to sleep instead of filling the time with their voices.”

It reminded me of when I first had the two of them for a summer. Bree was such a wee thing, toddling around on steady, rounded legs of a toddler. Isla had a more confident step as she guided her sister to me, their grandmother trailing behind them.

Bree’s hair was a mass of untamed curls, flattened by sleep on the plane, her eyes widened in complete amazement at the busy airport. There was a weariness in those blue irises as she approached, her eyes were calculating, at least it was how I interpreted the act.

Isla slowed a few feet from me, her voice soft and gentle as she explained to her sister I was the man in the computer. Bree still stared at me, refusing to budge a single inch closer.

Julia took over and pushed Isla in my direction. The girl took off and ran straight into my arms. I held her close, inhaled the scent of baby shampoo, and counted my blessings she was in my life. “I missed you daddy,” her thin arms squeezed tight around my neck.

I rubbed her back, took comfort of her warm weight when a shadow hovered over us. I peeled her off to find Bree there with a hesitant curiousness on her chubby face. There was a fading redness in those round cheeks, and I imagined she recently woke crying as she was prone to do.

Claire told me she didn’t take well to anyone waking her, and she generally let the girl do it on her own except when they had to go anywhere.

I raised my hand and waved at her with a friendly smile on my face. I didn’t want to scare her, but essentially I was a stranger to my own daughter. It was Isla who dominated our video calls,
who chattered about anything and everything happening in her life, while Bree popped her head in, fingers in her mouth, and then left. ‘She’s just shy’. Isla offered as an explanation for her sister’s absence.

Bree lifted a foot then another until she was right in front of me. Wet fingers poked at my face as she considered me thoroughly, seemingly appeased, she lifted her arms for me to carry her, which from the look on her grandmother’s face was a true honor.

Julia handed over their considerably tiny suitcases, but I knew from the previous summer how many clothes fit. She exchanged kisses and hugs with the girls, and kissed my cheeks before heading towards check-in for her flight to London to visit Tom.

I was left with two little girls who depended on me to know what I was doing. Isla took the handle of her suitcase and began rolling the little bag behind her. I leaned down to reach Bree’s, and we made our way out of the airport to the car park. Isla was plastered to my side. She was aware enough to stick close in a busy car area.

At my car, she stopped at the trunk and left her bag as she made her way to the doors, and I hid a smile at her presumptuous nature. Obviously, I was the one to put away her bags, but some children offered to help, not Isla though.

I unlocked it and carefully placed the girls’ suitcases inside before closing it. Isla strapped herself into the booster seat, clearly familiar with how to do it, and wanting to assert her independence.

I buckled Bree, and double checked her sister correctly did her own. I didn’t need Claire lecturing me down the road.

It was on the way to the apartment I lived in at the time, the girls drifted off to sleep, worn out from the long trip. It was the middle of the night for them, but as I studied their features in the rearview mirror, my heart melted at their small, sleeping faces.

There was a slight flush to their cheeks. I noticed the fluttering of their lids as they fell deeper in a REM cycle. These were my children. I had a hand in creating something new and wonderful, and I didn’t know how I would let them go at the end of summer.

“Did I ever tell ye about their first visit together?” We spent the remainder of the car ride exchanging stories about the girls, from the good to the bad. I wanted to share everything with her.

The girls woke about thirty minutes from our first stop. They were clearly hungry as they dug out the lunches they prepared for themselves.

It wasn’t quite the season for travel, but we didn’t need the warmth of summer to celebrate. Fall was everywhere, but it was a new beginning for the world around us. As the seasons and plants transitioned, we were transitioning as family, and by spring when the new bloom took and everything was anew, we would be as well. I slowed the car at the line of cars waiting at the booth for their signal to go.

When it was our turn, I handed the paper over with my reservation as we pulled up. It took some booking and finagling to arrange the entire weekend. Claire had to suck up to several people in order to get the time off even though it was a few days.

We drove ahead and parked the car, the girls were out of their seatbelts and opening the doors as soon as I parked. I rushed over to the other side to help Claire even if she didn’t necessarily enjoy my extra attention. I opened the door and offered my hand.

My heart fluttered at the tingling sensation of our connected hands. “Sometimes I think you’re
from an entirely different time.” She told me, a fond smile on her lips, warmth in her eyes.

“Maybe my soul had to wait a longtime to be with yours,” she sucked in a breath as I pulled her closer. My lips were close to her, I felt the puff of her breath against mine. Heat built between us as I stared into those soulful brown orbs and saw everything I ever needed to know.

I can’t say whose lips reached first, but the moment they connected, all thoughts left my brain, and I concentrated on the feel of her. We had done little more than share kisses since I’ve been back, but it was only a matter of time before we progressed to the next step.

Her tongue darted out of her mouth to entire mine. It was electric. I was trying to keep it PG as there were other people and families around us, and it wouldn’t do anyone any good if I were to become aroused. I wrenched my mouth free, the moment she pressed closer because I was only man, and she was a tempting wench.

I tapped her nose, a grin lit up her face as she noticed a certain part of me wasn’t as asleep as I would prefer. I glared at her, the sweetest sound escaped her lips in reply. I was astounded by the giggle because she rarely did that anymore.

Her hand slipped into mine as we made our way over to the railing beside our daughters who stared out at the water. It was a surprisingly nice day with a slight chilly breeze, not that it bothered either of them.

“You know this might be the best birthday ever,” Isla said, her eyes tracing the lines of the water.

I knew what she meant. We were a family.

Chapter End Notes

I'll post the second part in a few days. Also where do you guys think they're going?
Chapter Summary

Claire enjoys one of her favorite places.

Chapter Notes

Also thanks to everyone for the birthday wishes. I had a nice, low-key birthday, which is the way I like it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CPOV

A smile formed on my face as the house came into view, and I found myself sinking into relaxation. We needed the time as a family; family therapy started two weeks ago, and one of the suggestions from our therapist was to do more activities as a family. We lived our lives separately for the last nine years and it was time to start sewing them back together.

We were mending what was broken because of our prideful and stubborn natures. I glanced over at Jamie and saw the absolute delight in his blue orbs. They were bright and sparkled with his joy.

The girls were out of the car and running to the house, the moment the doors unlocked.

“So I have a question for ye?” I glanced at him warily. “If ye have the house, why do ye stay with yer friend Mel?” I covered my mouth to hide my giggles. He was adorable sometimes, and my heart melted whenever he was near.

I placed my hand in his and gave a gentle squeeze. “Jamie, we didn’t always have the house. The renovations only finished last summer, and the girls enjoy spending time with Mel. Her house is over in Chilmark, and we decided it might be nice especially once she got married to find our own house. We were here in Aquinnah one day, and I saw the for sale sign.”

My eyes focused on the paneled house before us. The views from the balcony overlooked the Sound and provided breathtaking sights of the water. “We can use the garage if you want, but most of the time we leave the car out. Winter is the only time we put the car inside.”

It was a two door detached garage. We actually had a car for when we were on the Vineyard inside as sometimes we simply hitched a ride with Mel. I hired a caretaker for the grounds and he started the car regularly for us. Occasionally he drove it when he prepared the house for our arrival, or to pick up anything needed. He was a valued employee, and took care of multiple houses on the island besides ours.

The house was built on the hillside with a rolling yard and stone walls with several paths, an open yard, and wooded areas. Ideally I wanted to retire to the house when it came time for that.

What captured my interest in the house was all of the windows as it reminded me of our house
back in Boston. It was light and airy. There was also a living space above the garage, which I used as an office on vacation.

The house was three levels with the bottom layer only seen from the back of the house because of the hillside.

The deck off the great room was my favorite spot, especially in the fall as the trees changed colors and the waves rolled in. The water was as blue as Jamie’s eyes.

“Come on,” I tugged gently on his hand. “I’ll show you around.”

We walked up the drive together, the girls were probably already halfway down the hillside, playing their make believe games, and relishing in the moments of being a carefree child.

The front door opened to the Great Room, which was the largest room of the house. The wood flooring was a nice chestnut color and was used throughout the house with the railing and balcony, the door and window frames, and we found a table to match. There was a stone fireplace between a large window and one of the glass doors.

The opposite wall was nothing but glass doors and windows. It was where most of the light flooded through the house, and provided the first glimpse of the outdoors. The rolling hills with their changing tree tops decorated our view.

Nestled into a corner was a black piano for Isla to use whenever the mood struck her. Most of the space was dominated by our long dining table and off white love seat and couch.

A wide doorway led into the kitchen with its’ modern appliances and white cabinets. It wasn’t as big as our kitchen at home, but it did the job when we were on the island.

Jamie’s eyes were glued to the windows as I took him through each room. “Where are the girls?” He finally asked, noticing the silence enveloping the house.

I pointed to the yard where two girls were running around chasing each other. “Let’s go,” I pulled him back into the great room and slid open the door.

A glass dining table sat on the deck with four chairs around it. A few potted plants lined the deck as Bree planted them over the summer. Gardening was her new favorite activity.

Jamie didn't follow me out, instead he silently explored the downstairs area from the book room to what was supposed to be the guest room. Photos littered the walls of past trips to the Vineyard prior to us owning the house. It was all the holidays we took when the girls were younger and we stayed with Mel.

Sometimes I forget how tiny they were with all of their missing teeth and pig tails. They rarely if ever let me touch their hair since they could do it themselves; the first day of school was a rare occasion.

I watched the girls from the deck as they played in the grassy knolls, childish laughter carrying across the yard. I didn’t want them to stay out too long for the small possibility they could catch a cold and that wouldn’t be an auspicious start to our weekend holiday.

Jamie and I discussed over the last month several things to do with the girls before the arrival of the baby in spring. Sadly, I was going to take a sabbatical instead of maternity leave. Jamie was new at his place of work and was still required to travel monthly to check on his business back in Scotland.
We agreed I wouldn’t go back to work until our child was at least six months old. I already discussed it with hospital administrators, and in the interim someone would fill in for me. It wasn’t ideal for them, but they understood my need to take time, especially as they were aware of my past history.

A Caesarean was discussed and mostly agreed upon with my Ob/gyn. I was sort of opposed to it, but given the danger last pregnancy, she didn’t want to take any chances.

Absentmindedly, my hands traveled down to the emerging bump. I marveled daily at the changes in my body. I had with each pregnancy because they were all so different and special. With Isla and Bree it was ages before I started showing. I was well into my fourth month when my belly began to pop out and people stopped wondering if I was gaining weight or with child.

My current bump was in the transitional stage since I was only just over a third of the way through my pregnancy; I would only get bigger as I progressed. I had already been shopping for new bras as my old ones were getting to be a little too tight and oppressive against my chest. I saw the way Jamie’s eyes lingered on my breasts, the way he admired my new assets, but he had a sound enough mind not to press me for anything more than the small kisses we occasionally exchanged.

It was more than slightly ironic as we had done the tango to get into our current situation, and currently our kisses were more chaste than our first one. There was a tentativeness to each touch, each whispered word, and every glance. His eyes showed his true feelings and intentions, but he held himself back at my silent reproach.

I couldn’t pinpoint the exact reason why I continued to keep him at a distance, but my therapist was quite willing to discuss my feelings on the matter. She suggested it was perhaps the reason I pushed him away in the first place. It was easier to run away than to face your feelings and fear, and if he left again I could say this was the reason why I never furthered our relationship.

I thought it was rubbish and stormed out only to come back five minutes later. She sat there expectantly as I ranted and raved at her, and then she curiously lifted a single brow and gestured for me to take a seat. She explained my reaction clearly showed she struck a chord; my lips pressed tightly together, unwilling to admit she was right. It was an oppressive silence as we stared one another down, neither of us inclined to concede on the matter.

Unfortunately, I was beginning to believe she was entirely right on the nose about my distance with Jamie. There were things I compromised on with him such as our sleeping arrangement on nights he stayed over because I enjoyed his strong, tender arms wrapped around me. It filled me with peace and security, and the empty parts of me didn’t feel so empty anymore. He was filling in all the little crevices of my cracked heart.

Lips pressed to my hair and arms wrapped around my neck as I sank into the warmth of his body. The breeze floated off the water, ruffling the trees and my hair, as I sighed and lived in the moment.

My thoughts tended to get me into trouble. I over thought everything, nearly ruining everything in the process. “Ye look so peaceful,” his voice was barely more than a whisper in the wind, as the velvety tones caressed something inside me. “it reminds me a bit of home.”

Often statements like that slice at my heart as I’ve taken the man away from his homeland, his people, the hills and cliffs, and the water he loves so much. Sometimes I think I’ve displaced him, and it isn’t with me where he truly belongs.

Somehow he managed to maneuver himself under me with his arms wrapped just under my breasts. The scent of him washed over me. It’s sandalwood and something distinctly him,
something fresh that sort of reminds me of Scotland.

“Sorcha,” fire erupted in my veins as it always did when he addressed me as such. For so long, I was only Claire to him, the mother of his children, the woman who broke his heart and sent him packing across the Atlantic. I know he never viewed me in such a light, but it was what I felt. “I want ye to ken something.” His tone was serious, anxiety crept along my skin as I braced myself. “I dinna mean Scotland as ye think I do.” Skepticism clouded my brain. “‘Tis more like how ye think of England,” his breath was warm against my scalp, tickling a little bit, but comforting as he reassures me of his presence there. “Ye’ve been home for so long even when I wasna with ye, ye were with me. I spent my time wondering what ye were doin’, if ye missed me like I did you.”

For once, I didn’t need to see his eyes to know the sincerity of his words. The honesty was in his voice as he told me the hidden depths of his heart, or the not so hidden because those words were in his eyes since he arrived, maybe even in his bedroom in Edinburgh. I wasn’t ready to admit what it was for fear of what it meant for us.

All the years, I denied myself the opportunity to think about him, or moments like this where we simply existed, where the outside no longer matter and it was us and our children.

The anger and resentment faded into the darkness as I accepted what I knew all along. I loved him with every fiber of my being, with every chip in my heart, and my soul and his were connected. The day in highlands where he made me his, I marked him as my own as it wasn’t us simply making love, we joined our souls forever. Although, the truth which I wrote in my journals was maybe we had done this multiple times throughout the centuries, and we were destined to meet again in each life.

“What are ye thinking?” He asked, breaking our prolonged silence.

I turned slightly in his embrace, kissing his chest. “Nothing, really,” I shrugged uneasily, not sure I wanted him to know everything in my head just yet.

He considered my words and chose to drop the subject, well aware I would share my thoughts with him when I was ready. I struggled constantly with openness and to reveal everything because I learned the truth about disappointment early in life. Loving someone also meant acceptance of when you inevitably lost them. Loss came in multiple forms, not just the permanence of death. People left and didn’t always have a choice in the matter, and those left behind dealt with their absence.

A loud squeal interrupted my morbid thoughts. I peered over the railing just in time to watch Bree tackle her sister into the grass. Both girls shrieked their joy at returning to the place of their youthful adventures.

Boston was home, but it also brought us back to our routine. Our life was schedule and we were planets merely orbiting each other on occasion. My job normally took up the majority of my time, not always leaving the opportunity for me to spend time with my children. On more than one occasion, I disappointed them because I was called into surgery or to consult or assist. There was always a reason for why I couldn’t attend a game, recital, school function, or to simply tuck them into bed at night.

They hid it well as they aged, plastering on fake smiles of understanding, while their eyes expressed their true feelings. They would never complain because they knew how I loved my job with its’ insane and hectic hours that drew me away from them, and they appreciated how while I wasn’t with them, I was saving other people. It wasn’t easy all the time either with words of hate thrown around when I was forced to explain my next absence.
Jamie’s thumbs brushed against my abdomen in soothing circles. His solicitous nature meant he couldn’t deny himself the chance to touch or ask me anything. He displayed his concern openly and never held back except in one area of our relationship. I hoped to reach the same point as him in the future; I supposed it was because I expected the last time to be just that, the last.

“Pound for yer thoughts?”

I snorted almost painfully. “We are in America,” I nudged him. “We say penny.”

The waves continued to roll in, breaking against the black rocks in the distance, spraying the air with splashes of white. If I strained my ears, I could almost hear the crashing of the waves, the exact sound as the water hits a barrier.

In a way, I related to those waves. They traveled such a distance and then a barrier stands in their path to the shore, interrupting the flow of water. The shore as always called to me and I yearned to answer, but I was anchored to Jamie. He pulled me and kept me in place, providing something heavy enough to keep me still and in place.

“Of all the places we could’ve picked, why this one?”

He was never one to mince words, or to ignore a topic because he didn’t want to know the answer. I wondered if it was the way he was brought up. There was a natural inquisitiveness, although he knew his boundaries.

I snuggled closer to him, taking solace in the extra warmth his body provided. “Have you ever been somewhere that made you feel complete? Serene?” I wasn’t sure if he knew what I was saying. I’m not entirely sure I was expressing myself correctly. “For me, the first time I came here, I shed a layer of myself, not literally, but in the metaphorical sense.” I sensed his uncertainty about my words. “Mel invited me and the girls because she not only saw the loneliness in me, but shared it herself. At that time, she hadn’t come out to her family and there was an estrangement. Her last relationship ended in disaster because of her inability to share the other side of herself.”

I wanted him to know who I was then and how I became who I am today. “I was lost for two years. We came the summer of 2011 for the first time. I went to see the cliffs here in Aquinnah, they’re clay cliffs by the way, so don’t worry if the water occasionally takes on a different shade.”

July 3, 2011

*Mel took the girls into town for ice cream giving me a reprieve, which she recognized I needed. I wasn’t supposed to have them, but Jamie had to rush to Paris to assist his cousin’s business as the man was in the hospital.*

*I knew it would be a while before she returned as the girls were notoriously slow and messy eaters at this stage in the game, not that I ever minded because they were all I had left of him. He took everything I had left besides the love for my children, sometimes I swore I was hollow on the inside, unable to process or filter through a single emotion again.*

*By following a single routine daily, I learned my life by rote. I never deferred from the path, continuing my life as I had every other day, not sure I knew how to leave the trail anymore anyways.*

*In their absence, I decided to leave the house, explore the slice of heaven Mel constantly talked about from her childhood. I was in a state of disbelief most of the time listening to her stories because they sounded almost too magical to be true.*

*I wanted to explore and see if her stories held true. I threw on some trainers, tied my hair back,*
and was out the door before I could second guess myself.

I had my car this time as Mel and I came down separately. She directed me to the road that led to the lighthouse when I first arrived, and I was finally taking advantage of my knowledge.

The town was formally called Gay Head; the name changed in the late nineties to Aquinnah. Mel spent a fairly significant amount of her childhood here until her parents divorced and her mom moved to Connecticut. She was a pure WASP.

I spotted the lighthouse in the distance, overlooking the Sound. The lighthouse was moved four years later to a new location because of erosion. It was 39 meters from where it originally stood, but I at least saw it in its’ original placement.

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The beach called to me, and I knew I could get a better look at the cliffs from the ground. There weren’t as many people out today as it rained the previous day, and was threatening to rain again.

The cliffs drew me to them with their beauty. They jutted out forming the western coastline of the island with surprisingly vibrant hues of red. I had read the sign about the clay deposits protected and owned by the Wampanoag tribe as them and their ancestors had inhabited the land for the last 10,000 years.

I yearned to have somewhere I called home. I wasn’t sure I would ever call England home again, and in some ways it never truly was where I belonged. Until Jamie’s appearance in my life, I dreamt of leaving the sometimes dreary place I called my home.

As I looked out into the water, I realized what it reminded me of. When we went to the beach, I often told Jamie how his eyes reminded me of the sea. They swirled with multiple shades of blue depending on his emotions.

My knees fell out from under me, and I was in the sand with the natural wonders of the world surrounding me. It was the cleanse I never knew I needed as first one tear then another fell down the contours of my face until I was laughing and crying.

I let go of the things I held onto for all these years. My therapist encourage me to find healthier outlets for my emotions instead of the burning rage inside of me.

“Are you okay?” My head swiveled to find an older woman with darker skin and a lined face that told the story of her life.

I wiped hastily at the tears lining my face, attempting to cover my emotions. The older woman was unfazed by this and slowly lowered herself to the ground beside me. "My name is Elizabeth,” she informed me. I remained silent, unsure of what the strange could possibly want with me, I was a weepy, pathetic mess unable to even prevent myself from crying on a public beach.

She waited patiently for me until I was ready. “Claire,” I finally offered her in return.

I peered at her face, noticing it was brown and ruddy at the same time. She was a member of the tribe. “How is it you came to be here today?” Her hair was once pure black, but strips of grey covered her head presently.

Normally I wasn’t one to reveal myself to anyone, but there was something about her kind and friendly disposition that allowed me to share with her. She merely listened as I told the tale of my
life and then chuckled at the end. “Claire, it is not the end of your story. You are young. You can’t even be of thirty years yet.” She wasn’t wrong. “Change is a natural part of life, and we are constantly preparing for transitions. Once my people lived across all of this land in large numbers, but over time we’ve become smaller. We’ve adjusted to the changes of Turtle Island,” my eyebrows rose at the unfamiliar reference. “It is what we call earth. We carry on the traditions of our people because if we don’t, who will? Life doesn’t stop because we desire it to.”

Elizabeth reminded me of my grandmother. She died when I was eight, leaving me devastated because she was the only other person who understood. “In the past, Aquinnah was referred to as the praying town. Despite the occupation of the Europeans, we managed to retain the land for our people.”

“Would you like to come over for some tea?”

I grinned at her as my lips trembled in gratitude. “Yes,” I found myself agreeing for no other reason than the kindness she expressed to me.

She lived in a three bedroom house, her grandfather built in the late nineteenth century. All of the fixtures were original with a large stone fireplace dominating the family room. “It is large because we gathered here and told stories when I was growing up.”

“How me?”

“We all find ourselves as lost souls, and something about you called to me.”

I focused on my tea, unsure of what to say to this seeming stranger. “I don’t normally cry so… publicly.”

“Do you cry?” It was a forward question, but I sensed she meant no harm in asking. “It is hard for strong women to unleash the waves of their emotions for fear it might consume them in the end.”

She spoke from experience. It was the tone of her voice that told me of her own struggles for balance. I fingered the rim of my mug as I considered her. “It takes a lot for me to express myself like that. Jamie always displayed emotion so easily, and let whatever he was feeling come out.”

“You are not him and he is not you.”

Then why did I feel that way? “Why does it feel like I lost half of my soul then?”

Her hands covered mine with such a tenderness I hadn’t felt since I last shared tea with my grandmother. “You come from the same soul, but you are still your own. You began to cleanse your soul of all the guilt you carry around with you. Loss is part of the circle of life. It is a cycle we all go through, and we must accept it.”

“I still visit her when we come to the island.” She became a surrogate grandmother to me. Her presence in my life helped me onto my path of healing. “She adores the girls who call her Granny.”

His chin rested on my shoulder, but he was still. If it weren’t for his soft breathing in my ear and the steady beating of his heart, I wouldn’t know he was alive. “I am grateful to her. Ye deserve to have people love you, Claire.”

“I know,” I murmured.

I fought it for so long because to protect myself from losing anyone, I couldn’t let them through
my impenetrable walls. I didn’t want anyone to possess that sort of power over me. In the end, it was me who hurt me through my incapacity to let people love me.

The girls eventually settle on the deck as the sun began to make its’ descent. The cliffs in the distant take on a purplish hue and the water, the deepest blue imaginable. The sun casted the sky in shades of the most spectacular orange and purple as it crept below the horizon.

Isla and Bree headed inside to change for dinner as we were going out to eat. We had a reservation at seven at The Aquinnah Shop. It was a tradition of ours since our very first trip to the island. Mel said we hadn’t experienced seafood until we tried it here.

When the girls were younger, we usually shared an entrée. Mel shared with one and I with the other.

With our bags out of the car, everyone dressed into something a bit nicer for dinner. There were grass stains on Bree’s white school shirt, but I wasn’t overly bothered by it. Her tights were a different story with a few runs and one big hole. I shook my head, but it was typical of her as she usually went through at least six pairs by the spring thaw.

Bree was the first one ready with her plush grey button dress that reached just below her knee. She paired it with her black tights and black stretch ankle boots, she occasionally used as her school shoes. It was becoming harder to find dresses that weren’t too short as not only did she have long legs, she also had a long torso. She wore a size 12 in girls, which was different than her sister at the same age. Isla was wearing a size 10, and during school clothes shopping this year had finally managed to extend into juniors, only because she thought shopping in the kids section was too mortifying.

She paired her dress with her beige trench coat. She hated puffy jackets and refused from the moment she could speak to wear one.

Isla followed her sister a few minutes later in a navy floral, lace up high-neck dress. She forewent tights unlike her sister, but paired it with a pair of brown booties. She wore a white cardigan with her grey pea coat over her arm.

I swallowed back my emotions as I saw for the first time she wasn’t a little girl anymore. In many ways, she would always remain my little girl, but to the rest of the world, she was becoming a young woman. Her face lacked most of the roundness of her youth, her cheek bones almost jutting out revealing the sharpness of her face. When did it happen? She was gangly giving her the appearance of being stretched out, but soon enough puberty would help fill in the angles of adolescence with the curves of womanhood.

She argued for make-up, but I made my position clear on the matter. Jamie deferred to me when she attempted to bargain with him. He knew almost nothing about make-up and didn’t feel informed enough to make a decision. I had no issues with it, but I didn’t want my daughter looking like she was several years older than her age. We would revisit the subject when she was in high school, but for now she could go with her natural, pretty face.

Worse was that her sister wasn’t far behind her. Bree held no interest in make-up at the moment, but in a few years it could all change. She was nearly the height of her sister, and would be wearing the next size in clothes soon enough. It scared me to think how fast time passed. One minute they were helpless and entirely dependent with their incoherent babbling and then the next they were taking care of themselves and planning full fledged arguments to get what they wanted.

Jamie squeezed my hand. He understood. He was right next to me. He missed more than I had, and for him it was almost as if it had occurred over night with the way they grew in a year.
The new baby would remind us we weren’t as old as we were casting ourselves to be, but it reminded us of the time belonging to the past. Time we couldn’t recover, despite our deepest desires.

“Okay birthday girl, you ready?”

Isla rolled her eyes at the question I asked her every year. It wasn’t about if she was ready to go out. I was really questioning if she was ready for all the tribulations and joys of the next year, and if she was prepared for the next chapter in the saga of her life.

Her arms wrapped around me as her lips pecked my cheek. “You shouldn’t cry mom.” She said as we walked out the door. “Grandma told me how you couldn’t wait to grow up either. It’s a natural part of life, and we all do it. I’ll always be your kid,” she informed me. I found myself staring after her as she rushed up behind her sister to tickle her.

Despite all the difficulties I had in understanding her, it was through all the confusion I related to her best. I recalled the time when I wanted nothing more than to live on my own and do whatever I wanted, regardless of my mother’s opinion.

“You coming mommy?” Bree asked, her brow scrunching as I stood outside our front door.

I nodded and made my way towards my family. My daughter was twelve, and it was a beautiful day. Those first weeks of her life terrified me as I never thought she would make it to one let alone twelve as a healthy, vibrant, mouthy girl.

“Mom, you walk like a snail. You aren’t even at the waddling stage yet.” Isla cackled as I buckled myself in.

Jamie and I exchanged looks, no longer needing words to communicate that which we already knew. “It isn’t always about how fast you get there,” I told her, knowing the words wouldn’t make any sense to her. While I tried to instill values instead of advice into my daughters, I knew it would be years before they comprehended the knowledge I imparted in them. I was fine with that as it was the natural order of things. Kids often disregarded things their parents said.

“Let’s go to dinner because I’m starving,” Bree and Isla said at the same time. “Jinx, double jinx, triple jinx.” They giggled and shoved each other jovially. There was nothing but love floating in the car.

Worry niggled at me, it wasn’t always going to be this easy.

Chapter End Notes

Some of you guessed right. I left it vague so it could’ve been several places within driving distance of Boston. I’ve never actually been to Aquinnah, but one of my friends lives there and absolutely loves it. Thank you guys for being so fantastic and I love to read your comments.
Interlude: Mr. Lonely

Chapter Summary

A look at Jamie's life through the years.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**September 2009**

*Her face bore the concern and worry she had for me, but there was an unknown emotion swirling inside of her as well. It wasn’t misplaced either.*

*I extended my arms for her to hug me as I saw the anticipation building in hers, as usual she did the unexpected and clobbered me over the head. I winced, rubbing at the tender spot. “Ye’re so dotey. When did ye become a feartie?”*

*I muttered angrily, still massaging my head. “I dinna ken as to what ye’re referring to?”*

*She crossed her arms with a fierce look as she turned on her heel. I followed helplessly after her, still lost as to what was driving her round the bend. After all these years of marriage, the opposite sex still left me mystified. They were all batty and teamed up together against men, speaking a language only they were aware of.*

*“Jenny, I ken ye’re angry,” her glared turned on me as she halted her steps immediately. I knew then I said the wrong thing to her as she swiveled to face me. I stopped just short of running to her.*

*Her lips pinched tightly together as her eyes crinkled. “Ye may not be marrit any longer, but that doesna mean ye should leave yer family. Did ye even try?” Her eyes held a glassy sheen, and I was ashamed.*

*Claire wasn’t only mine but hers as well. They had become sisters. She was at the funeral to provide solace to me, but she was there to support Claire as well. Claire was there when Maggie was delivered and held the bairn before anyone else in the family. “Can we not talk about this here?”*

*Passerby stared as we argued in the middle of an airport. Jenny’s cheeks burned with her embarrassment of causing a scene and she firmly nodded, not exchanging anymore words with me.*

*The drive to Inverness was long and fraught with tension as she refused to say a single word. She was disappointed in me. I wish I could say I dinna expect it, yet I kent my sister better than anyone, well perhaps Ian knew her best. Aside from him, I knew her from birth and spent my life growing up behind her. After our mother died, she tried her best to instill the same lessons into me that our mother imparted in her, especially the ones about love, marriage, etc.*

*With the thirty minutes to the estate, she finally broke our extended silence. “Do ye nae care that yer family is across the Atlantic?”*
“Ah wisnae aware it was any of yer business.”

A guttural noise, almost animal like, sort of like a growl escaped her as her icy eyes landed on me. “Ah cannae with ye when ye’re behaving like this. Do ye nae want to be with yer bairns?”

I clicked my teeth, almost painfully as I tried to ignore her bait. She was testing me to see how I would react when she mentioned my children specifically.

“Wit?”

“’Tis all fine if ye wanna ruin yer relationship with yer wife-“

“Ex-wife,” I cut her off immediately. A painful stabbing sensation in my chest distracted me from her lecture. I inhaled sharply as I realized the pain was from the comprehension Claire wasn’t my wife any longer, not even through the church.

She waved her hand dismissively at me. “Ye can think all ye like she’s not yer wife, but in yer heart, ye kent very well ye belong together.” She gave me a warning glance not to interrupt her any longer. “Ye ken as well as ah I do that she’s terrified of commitment. She has abandonment issues.” I was aware. “Did ye even try and fight?”

I sighed, knowing it wasn’t easy for my sister to accept, we simply couldn’t be together. It was one thing after the next this last year, and I couldn’t take it any longer. Neither could she, I reminded myself snidely. “Jenny, she and I cannae compromise. She wants things I cannae give her.” It wasn’t entirely true.

“How no’?”

I loved my sister. I did. I also knew before booking my flight back to Scotland, it was going to be a battle to get her to comprehend Claire and I weren’t getting back together. We weren’t good. We hurt each other, and the last thing I wanted now was to hurt her more than I had. “She thinks I had an emotional affair.”

Jenny slammed on the breaks, lucky for her there wasn’t anyone else driving on these old roads. “Jenny!!” I exclaimed as I pushed out my arms to prevent me from slamming into the dashboard.

It was odd after these last few years in America being on the opposite side again. “Ye dinnae get to Jenny me after what ye just revealed. Are ye an eejit? Did mam drop ye on yer wee head? Was she right?”

I turned away not wanting to give her credence, although my silence spoke of my shame. “It isnae as ye think it is. We were friends. It is all… mostly.”

Her eyes were slits, the blue barely peeking through. “Mostly?”

I raked a hand through my hair as I buried my face in my hands. All I wanted was to return to the place where I was safest prior to life spitting me out. My body shuddered as I started to sob because everything wasn’t the way it should be. I belonged in Boston with Claire and my daughters, and we should’ve had a son. Instead there were over 3,000 miles separating us across an ocean.

I imagined what she might be doing at the moment. There was a fairly good chance she was in class, working hard her last year in preparation for applying to residency programs next year. Our girls were probably with a babysitter if she hadn’t enrolled them in daycare yet.

“I’ve failed Jenny,” I cried as it hit me all at once the reality in which I lived.
There was no longer a Claire there for me to talk about my day, to drink wine when we were
tired, to flirt with when we were tipsy, or to love when the days were hard.

“Do ye recall what mam used to say to us when we were barely more than bairns ourselves?” I
shook my head. I forgot a lot of the things our mother said to us because I took for granted her
presence in our lives. “She used to tell us whit’s fur ye’ll no go past ye.”

I stared at her uncomprehendingly, familiar with the phrase, unsure of how it related to my
current situation. “It means whatever happens to ye was always meant to.”

My mood soured further at the thought I was meant to lose Claire. What was the purpose of our
relationship if we were never meant to have one another?

“I dinnae ken what to do. She isnae going to forgive me and she doesnae want me any longer.”

Her arms wrapped around me and she held me like she did when I was a wee lad. “Ye’re not
alone.”

2015

I yawned tiredly as my eyes drooped. My breakfast was cooling, and I had yet to take a single bite
of the eggs. My head fell onto my shoulder once again as I sat up to wake myself up, finding my
eyes could barely open.

As my eyes slid shut again, an annoying sound began to blare in the general direction of my
phone. I groaned as I smacked the irritating device.

It was then I realized it wasn’t my alarm, but someone was actually calling me. I didn’t look at the
ID. before answering and found to my utmost surprise, I recognized the sound of her breathing.
Ordinarily a statement like that would sound stalker-ish, but I spent a significant amount of time
sleeping next to her. I laid awake beside her, listening to her breathe, relishing in my own delight
that god chose to allow someone like her to enter my life.

She hadn’t answered when I said “hello.” I could almost hear her inner thoughts over the phone
as she began to over think and panic.

Years passed and I was left more with the ghost of her. Sometimes it was hard to consider and
actually believe we were real. It was a brief interim from the pain I often thought of as my life.

“Sassenach,” I rasped, my voice held hints of sleepiness. I hoped she didn’t notice, although she
expressed a bit of randy side when she heard that particular tone. “Claire, I can hear ye
breathing.”

I pictured her. Her eyes were more than likely closed as she considered her options, perhaps she
was biting her lip. They were nervous ticks of hers when she became extremely anxious, and I
imagined she felt the same apprehensiveness I did.

Then I thought about what sort of scenario would allow her to call me, especially in what was the
middle of the night. I glanced at my watch, frowned because she should be asleep. It hit me. “Oh
Dhia!” I exclaimed. “Are ye drunk?”

She sighed softly on the other side. There was more silence on her end until she finally responded
with a “yes”.

I began shuffling to clean my mess from breakfast as I need to finish getting ready for the day.
“Have ye had any water?” I knew her answer before she said it. I was the one with Claire on her eighteen birthday when she got plastered for the first time. Normally, she was too reckless when she went out with friends and let them talk her into more, or she used it to avoid what was going on.

“No,” she murmured, the soft cadence of her voice washed over me. “I’ve only settled now.” Her head was probably hurting her. She described it usually as a foggy sensation. “I’m not sure why I called you,” she admitted. Her admissions warmed my heart because out of all the people she knew right there in Boston, she called someone she wasn’t entirely on speaking terms with across the Atlantic. She called me. I should’ve been the last person she thought about, yet here I was the one she rang.

We both knew she was lying to herself though about the purpose of her call. She was usually her most honest when she was drunk. “I think we both ken that’s a lie.” I imagined she was close to puking at the moment, depending on how much she drank. From the sound of her, there were shots involved. It was strange she was drinking in the first place as she rarely went out, even during our colleges days she was mostly the type to prefer to stay in with a good movie. “Do ye want to tell me the real reason?” I swallowed nervously, not sure I was prepared for what she might say.

Her eyes likely darted as she contemplated her words. I cornered her. She had two options: end the call, pretend it never happened or answer me. “I’m lonely. I fear I’ve made a mess of everything in my life, and what if I never find happiness again? Maybe I’m destined to be alone and watch others find their own.”

She nearly tore my heart out. I related to her as I felt the same way every time one of my friends found someone and merrit them. It was almost unfair that I the first of us was the one who lost it all. Their wives were providing them homes full of bairns, creating large families. If she were sober, there was no way she’d talk to me.

I conversations were full of tension, distrust, and focused entirely on the two beings we were responsible for bringing into the world. Other than them, I believed she didn’t want anything else to do with me. We hurt each other constantly. She hurt me with her inability to tell me what bothered her, instead she suffered in silence until it nearly burst out of her. By then it was too late to do damage control as she’d already made up her mind about a situation.

With her declaration of divorce, I nearly projectile vomited because she voiced it. I knew there was a possibility as the months passed, our communication deteriorated, and she stared at me passively with each passing day. I was going to be sick as her eyes stared straight at me and told me everything we built was over.

The day those papers were signed, we resigned ourselves to our fates, to separate futures that were unlikely to collide again in the future.

I carried the same guilt she did. We both felt it pressing on us constantly, but as the weeks passed, I couldn’t share my shame with her. How could I tell her the horrid thoughts I had about her in the moments she was suffering one of the worst tragedies of her life? How could I explain she’d been right about Britney? How the moment her lips pressed against mine, I knew where I was supposed to be and it wasn’t working? How when I saw her curled in on herself in that hospital bed, I wanted nothing more than to wrap myself around her and protect her from the world’s evils? Yet, this was where we were.

Two strangers, former lovers, former spouses, and only just parents now existing in a single moment, hoping it lasted forever.
I licked my lips nervously because I knew the call couldn’t last forever. I had to go to work and she needed to rest. I wrinkled my nose and felt the pinching of my eyes as I prepared myself. It was nice being Claire and Jamie again. “Claire, sweetheart ah think ye’ve also had too much to drink, but ah also believe ye’ll find happiness again.” The words came out almost painfully because she would. Any man would be lucky to love her. It wasn’t hard. “Ye’re such an intelligent, beautiful, strong, compassionate, compelling woman that any man would be lucky to call ye his.”

I knew I was lucky when she was mine. I told anyone and everyone when she agreed to date me. It was a true honor she accepted my offer. In the time, we existed as friends, I carefully treaded the boundary between friends and more as I knew we could be. I craved it more than anything, but then I always came back to the fear we might lose our friendship. I valued her as my friend, which kept me from kissing her sooner.

It was the hardest part to deal with after the divorce, and one of the things my therapist focused on the most. I didn’t just resent her because she refused to open up to me about the loss we both suffered. I resented her because she not only took away my wife, she stole my best friend too. Parts of me hated her at times.

My mind came back to the present. I almost saw the tears in her eyes as she processed the sincerity of my words. “Do you consider yourself among them?” While for her, the question was awkward as she thought she didn’t have the right to ask these sorts of things, I wasn’t bothered in the slightest about it.

For no other reason than she owned my heart forever. I couldn’t give my heart to anyone else because she stole it the day she fell in my lap. I would date and certainly try to find someone else, but deep down I was scared I would end up alone in the end as the one person I wanted would inevitably find someone else.

“Always,” my voice soft as I confessed my truth. “I cannae pretend as if ye weren’t the love of my life. I ken some people believe we have multiple, but I think there’s only one soul for everyone. I lost my other half and maybe it was never mine to begin with.”

I flashed back to the car with Jenny as she forced me to think maybe we weren’t meant for each other. If we were, we wouldn’t have led it crumbled the way it did.

It was likely the early hour that made me bold enough to say such a thing to her, especially after all this. I hadn’t seen her face in six years as every picture she sent with the girls was just that, our daughters.

My right thumb rubbed at my left ring finger where my C tattoo rested. I could’ve gotten it removed, but my heart was married to one person. In our joint silence, I felt her contemplation as well, her desire to explain her feelings and reassure me of her own devotion to our broken love, yet like myself she kept quiet. Regret marred our skin with ugly scars as kept our lies and truths to ourselves, not sharing because we felt justified in our own pride.

The river was there again. She was on the other side, yelling at me again, and the water rushed and roared between us, preventing me from hearing what it was she so desperately wanted me to know.

“Is it pathetic if I told you I still loved you?”

Be still my beating heart. A miracle has occurred, one I’m not sure I could even fully appreciate yet. She loved me. A darker part of her heart bore the same feelings of hate as I did, but the larger part often won the battle. The problem was love wasn’t absolution. It didn’t fix the problems we
had. It highlighted the distance, the gap we created so we didn’t have to see each other. I didn’t want my wounds ripped open, baring raw sin as she dumped salt on an already torn wound.

“Would ye pity me if I told ye, I could never love anyone like you?” The veracity of my words terrified me because what did it mean for the rest of my life? Was there someone out there who could accept a fraction of what I had left to offer?

She choked on her own tears. I damned the three thousand miles separating us, the metaphorical river because I wanted nothing more than to be the one to brush away them away. I wanted to kiss her face and pledge myself to her forever. “Maybe one day,” she said, the pain evident in her voice.

Her pain resonated deeply within me. We were two souls suffering in our joint agony we created together. My throbbing heart could hardly take the phone call. I sensed the finality of the moment. Slowly we transitioned back into battle ready warriors. “Get some rest, drink water, and be happy Claire. The future will come.” She ended the call seconds after some of the hardest minutes of my entire life.

The worst part was we still belonged to each other if the call was any indication. Did I really want to be hers?

The answer: yes.

I pledged my blood, my tears, and the entire essence of who I was to her. She had it all including my past and my memories.

2016

Lips traveled up the column of my neck. My hand moved to her hair as I stroked gently. “Ye cannae play with a man like that,” I told her as she giggled.

Her green eyes popped open as she beamed at me in delight. “Maybe I enjoy the teasing,” she sucked hard on my neck as I moaned deeply. She knew what she was doing and was quite good at it.

I captured her mouth with my own until things escalated and we were under the sheets, letting nature take over. Our bodies covered in a layer of sweat lay on the mattress without anything to cover us, naked as the day we were born. Her pale blonde hair shone brightly in the filtered moon light. “Ye’re beautiful,” I told her. I meant it as well.

She was a true beauty to behold. While I didn’t usually find myself attracted to blondes as feisty, independent brunettes were my thing, there was something about her that captivated me.

I saw her pale cheeks flush in the evening light at my compliment. My knuckles grazed her cheeks as I enjoyed the innocence she exuded. I wouldn’t characterize what we had as love, but there was a possibility for something. I’m not sure I could love with such a ferocity as I had in the past, but I would give her everything I could.

“What is bother you?” She read me well, knew my facial expressions, or the look in my eye. My moods varied from hour to hour, day to day, especially on significant days relating to her. I wouldn’t do that though. I wouldn’t bring another woman into our relationship. It was unfair to both of them. Claire made her decision. I was making mine.

Her finger stroked my face as she gazed at me such open affection. I saw the love she bore for me. Guilt gnawed at me and burned my insides as I wasn’t ready to say it to her. I wasn’t sure what it
was. Nothing compared to the way I felt for my Sassenach, but could love feel differently?

I remembered the jealousy as it raged inside me like hot lava two years ago when I saw her with HIM. From eavesdropping on more than one conversation with Jenny, I knew she was still with him. It was clearly becoming serious if after two years she hadn’t found a reason to call it off. Was he the one she was destined for? Was I merely a piece to get her where she was meant to go all along?

I didn’t like to entertain those thoughts. My therapist encouraged me with plenty of entreaties to start dating again. I was holding onto the past with everything, not allowing myself to think about the future I could have. With my head turned one way, I missed everything in the opposite direction.

“Ally,” I breathed as her hand began it’s trek south. “Ye’re full of surprises tonight,” I growled as I rolled on top of her.

Hogmanay 2017

“Jamie, we’ve been dating nearly two years,” she argued as I again turned down her offer to meet the girls.

It was a last minute trip Claire proposed because of someone supposed last minute plans.

I ignored the twinge on my heartstrings when I thought of her. I tried to put her firmly in the past where she belonged. It was difficult when I saw my daughters and how much they resembled her. It wasn’t entirely outwards appearance as they were taking a bit more after my side than hers, it was their demeanors, facial expressions, or things they said. It reminded me of her.

Alison frowned as she sat on the mattress. “Do ye nae think it’s strange I havenae met yer daughters?”

I gazed at her, understanding her frustration with me because it was another opportunity in which I was denying her entrance into the other side of me. My daughters were a huge part of my life even in America. I spoke regularly with them in any format I could get at the time and savored when they spent two glorious months here with my every summer.

Every time I attempted to make introductions, something occurred, prolonging their meeting. It wasn’t right I kept excluding her.

“Did ye want to go with me to pick them up at the airport?” They were flying at a later time than usual.

Most of the trip was very last minute as Claire phoned two weeks ago to give me the offer. She said she understood if I couldn’t take them, and they could stay with her mother instead. I cut her off immediately and accepted because it was a rare chance I probably wouldn’t receive again.

Alison’s wide smile showed all of her glossy teeth. She dragged my lips to hers to show her appreciate.

At the airport, she clung nervously to my hand as we awaited for the girls to disembark the plane. I saw the top of Isla’s head as her and her sister walked with the flight attendant into view. It was strange to see them at this time of year. They were bundled up in layers, thicker than the ones they wore during some of the cooler days of summer.

They were taller, or I was projecting. Either way, there were subtle differences in their appearances compared to give months ago when I sent them home on a plane.
I had also never seen them so close after their birthdays, well in Bree’s case I hadn’t. I was there for Isla’s first two. FaceTime calls were placed after school where I was rewarded with the best gifts. I told them while they received gifts on their birthdays, they were mine. They rolled their eyes and called me sentimental and embarrassing. It was the first time those words came out.

Bree and Isla were muttering back and forth about something rather emphatically by the expressions on their faces. Isla’s eyes were blue fumes waiting for more accelerant to increase the size. Bree wasn’t in agreement with her sister about whatever had them disagreeing.

Their conversation died off as soon as they neared enough to notice I wasn’t alone. I saw the flash of a scowl on Isla’s face before she hid it under a placid smile. Her eyes burned with blue hatred. Her sister was more polite, friendly, and tried to be far more welcoming of the new presence. “I’m Alison,” she introduced herself to them. “Ye must be Bree,” and Bree beamed in apparent delight. Her youthful face still round, a tooth missing on her bottom row, and her hair in disarray from the flight.

“You would be right.” Alison was slightly taken aback as most people were when they realized my daughters were American. She knew, but reality was far different. “How long have you and daddy known each other?” I saw her eyes dart to our clasped hands before lifting to meet Alison’s.

“About two or so years, how about ye?”

Bree covered her mouth as she giggled. “I guess nine years as of last month.” She answered, covertly nudging her sister in the process.

Alison’s eyes moved to Isla. “And I suppose that makes ye Isla. Yer dad told me all ‘bout ye.”

I’d never seen such hostility on my little girl’s face, but there was a loathing the likes of which I hadn’t seen. “Yes,” her voice cool, barely containing her anger. “Although he hasn’t told me anything about you.” I hadn’t known her to be callous in the past and was shocked how cruel she was.

I excused us and pulled her aside. “Isla, I dinnae ken where yer attitude is coming from, but I just want to spend the holiday with ye and yer sister. Alison has waited a long time to meet ye, can ye be nice?”

I saw her resist the urge to roll her eyes. It was that particular idiosyncrasy where her mother came out in her. Claire wasn’t one who could manage her temper or annoyance all too well either. It showed on her face, despite her best attempts to hide it. Isla crossed her arms and trudged back over to Alison and Bree.

She apologized for her behavior, but her arms remained folded across her chest. They only unfolded as she rolled her suitcase. She placed her beanie on her head as went out into the cold. At least they were accustomed to colder climates as Boston wasn’t paradise in the winter.

Four days later, the girls were headed back to their home. Alison and I were no longer together as Isla made it clear her opinion on my girlfriend after she called her a gold digging “hoor” in front of everyone at Hogmanay celebrations. Her pronunciation, not her words had me smiling, but I quickly dragged her out of the room, upstairs to the room she shared with her cousins.

“Ye cannæ say things like that. Do ye have no shame?”

Her cheeks flamed, but I saw the defiance in her stance. “What do you care?” She asked
petulantly. “All you’ve had time for is her since we got here. If you didn’t want us here, we could’ve stayed with grandma.” Underneath all of her bravado, I saw a scared little girl, afraid to share her dad.

Alison couldn’t handle Isla’s outright dislike and mistreatment of her and ended things between us. “I love ye, but I cannae compete with them. There isnae even a competition,” she informed me sadly.

While I didn’t love her the same exact way, I did love her. I hated hurting her, but she was right. My daughters came first. Isla would never accept her.

“I love ye,” I told her.

“I ken, but it’s nae enough. I need someone who wants only me. Ye dinnae even want more bairns.”

It was partially true. I did. I just couldn’t see anyone having my children except for the one who already mothered two of them. If I couldn’t have anymore wee ones with her then I was done.

She drove up separately so there wasn’t an awkward drive back to the city.

Before she departed Isla gave me a peculiar look. “I’m sorry about your girlfriend. Maybe 2018 will be the year all your dreams come true,” she shrugged, her eyes downcast as she realized why I was single. “I really am repentant about the situation. I know she made you happy, and you deserve that dad. You truly do.”

I kissed her head and hugged her again. “Dinnae cause yer mother more trouble. I will keep what happened to myself, if ye promise to behave.”

She winked at me as she headed in her sister’s direction.

They were the embodiment of their mother. It did bother me how my daughter casually used the word whore. I wasn’t too appreciative of the language, and wondered if it was something her mother said. I called her prior to the girls arriving to inform her about Alison and the future introductions. She didn’t seem bothered, although there was some indication she wasn’t happy. There was a chance I read too much into it.

The week was interesting. It was different than our normal summer escapades together. Isla spent far too much time on her computer, messaging friends on the other side of the world.

Bree ended up with a slight cold. She slept it off, but it diminished our time together. We hadn’t been able to do much as Bree started to feel better the day before they left. The probability was high she caught it from someone on their way here as she hadn’t been to school in a week. It gutted me to know I was partially responsible for her feeling poor.

As I watched their plane take off, I thought about Isla’s words. 2018 was going to be a big year. I had a good feeling about this one.

Chapter End Notes

If you don’t remember, Claire drunk dialed Jamie back in chapter 17. Also shoutout to Dreams_come_easily for the idea and to Sara for making me laugh so hard. I
needed that so thanks!
Tell Me

Chapter Summary

So maybe everything doesn't need to be fixed at one time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tell me I'm your baby
And you'll never leave me
Tell me that you'll kiss me
Forever

JPOV

I watched her stand where the sea meets land as the waves rolled in, burying her feet in sand. Her jeans were rolled up to her ankles and she wore a light jacket.

The breeze coming off the water blew her hair forth, providing cover for her face. Her arms were held at her side as she simply enjoyed a quiet morning on the beach. It was the off season for the vineyard, and the beaches were mostly empty this time of year.

Isla and Bree were sent off to Granny’s the night before for some fun and food. We didn’t expect them back until later today.

It was an interesting experience to view all of them in a setting removed from the hustle of their every day lives.

The environment was relaxed, which was Claire needed more than anything in the second trimester of her pregnancy. We were planning to begin telling members of the family about the our newest addition. We wanted to get her through the first trimester, which was always the scariest as it held the most risk for losing the baby. There were no actual guarantees, but her doctor was monitoring her regularly.

I observed as her hands cradled the almost nonexistent bump. Her head tilted downward as she marveled at the changes in her body. She hadn’t known I followed her here as she walked the trails to the beach.

She slid out of bed without jostling the mattress, but I sensed her disappearance immediately. I slid on my shoes and grabbed a jacket, and hung back as she trailed down to the water.

Her head turned slightly as she beckoned me over, somehow knowing I was there without me ever saying anything. “I love it here,” her voice was soft, almost overpowered by the wind. “I realize how unfair I’ve been to you. Don’t for a second think I’m unaware of the distance I keep.” I tried to keep the shock or any emotion off my face because this was her time. There were things she needed to say without me interjecting to get my viewpoint across.

“For so long, I thought it had to be against the world.” Her eyes darkened slightly at this. “When I saw Britney’s interest in you, it seemed that was that.” I opened my mouth to interrupt, but she
held her hand for me to stop. “I know very well you didn’t have an actual interest in her. Perhaps you were attracted to her, but you’re a man who thrives on commitment. No matter how frustrated you were with me, you would’ve never cheated on me. I used it as a justification to further push you away because I didn’t want to be hurt.” Tears fell recklessly down her face, but she made no move to wipe them.

She turned toward me with glassy orbs full of apologies, burdened with guilt and sorrow, beginning me to understand and forgive her. It was my forgiveness she yearned for, but would never outright ask as she believed she didn’t deserve it. “If I sent you away first, then I could save myself the pain of you walking away. I stole your choices from you and decided everything including our divorce. I don’t understand how you can forgive me.”

I slid my hands up her cool, pink cheeks and held her gaze. “Do ye nae think I kent what was happening wit ye?” I had inklings of her thought process at the time, but hadn’t done anything to outwardly change her opinion of me. “I was ashamed myself for how I behaved when ye told me about our bairn.” I wasn’t sure I could ever really say his name without the accompanied pang in my heart. “Ye were so beautiful, lush, and burgeoning with child, my child. I dinnae want ye to think ye were the only one who messed up our relationship. Then when ye lost him, there was nothing ah could do. I kept ruining everything.”

She smiled sadly at me. “It would’ve happened anyways. It isn’t anyone’s fault. My doctor told me I was already losing him.”

I cut her off. “But the stress…”

Her hands reached up to cup my face as she forced me to look at her. “It didn’t make any difference. I’ve learned that he wasn’t really meant for us. I believe god chose a special job for him. He will always be in our hearts.”

My throat clogged as my eyes brimmed with emotions. It was hard to accept what she was saying. While we had the same amount of time to cope with the loss of our son, she knew for longer than I did there was simply nothing we could’ve done to save him. “It was hard for me to come to terms with in the beginning. I thought I had done something wrong.”

We both had. “We should’ve come together instead of grow apart.” She placed a finger over my mouth and shushed me.

“I shouldn’t have blamed you, but it was easier having a reason than these things happen. I wanted you to feel as miserable as me because then I wouldn’t be the only one sad. It was wrong. I took your initial reaction and allowed it to be what I used to condemn you.” I pulled her to me and we shed our tears into the sea. Our broken edges fit perfectly together.

“What I didn’t want to admit was how much I missed you and needed you all of these years. I- I tried to date men as opposite of you as possible. None of them came to anything so don’t worry.” She eased my mind almost immediately. “They were never you.”

I placed kisses in her hair, relishing in the closeness I thought was lost to me forever. It was surreal to find her in my arms again, carrying my bairn, and still in love with me. “Ah I love ye, mo chridhe.”

She nestled her head into my chest, her nimble fingers clutching at my jacket. “I don’t want to keep you away anymore.”

“I willnae let ye.” I held her tight to me.
“I’m a bit cold. Do you think we could go back to the house?” I smiled because she was always freezing. I held her hand as we made our way back to her house.

“When do ye think the lasses will be back?”

“Oh probably not until later tonight,” her hands slid under my shirt and I squirmed at the frigidness of her hands.

They roamed my backside and I felt myself begin to rise. We hadn’t done anything aside from kiss since we conceived our child. “Sassenach,” I groaned almost painfully at the tightening of my pants.

Her eyes lifted to mine. In them I saw the love she bore for me and the forgiveness in her eyes. We were meant to be. She was my còmhla ri anam.

I lowered my mouth down to hers gently at first to see how she would respond. I teased her mouth open as she had yet to fully respond to me. Within seconds, our tongues were tangled and she was kissing me back. Her fingers were in my hair, pulling me closer to her. After a few moments, my name was a whisper on her lips, begging me for more. As I broke the kiss, my lashes flutter against her cheeks as I dip my head.

“Make love to me,” her voice nothing but a plea.

We make our way up the stairs, my arms around her as I nipped at the sinewy skin of her neck. The scent of roses washed over me. “Jamie,” she giggled helplessly.

As we entered the room, I turned her around to face me and took in all of her beauty. Her eyes were expressive and conveyed her desire for me.

Her hands pulled me towards her as she began to lift my shirt impatiently, starting at the shoulders then at my hip. She was frantic as she tried to get me undressed. I needed to feel all of her to know she was real and here with me. The night in July was a parting, but this was a joining. There was nothing to separate us anymore, and I had to have her.

I recalled on our forbidden night, the tone of melancholy shared between the two of us as we both were more than aware it was the last time. Something hung in the air and we took it slow, savoring each second of our coupling because when morning came, I was the man she was no longer married to; and she was returning home to a man she was considering as a potential husband.

I stopped her hands as I wanted the chance to undress her. Normally, I loved watching her do it herself, but I wanted the honor and privilege of having her with me again. My hands pushed back her jacket and it landed with a silent thud on the floor. Then I began to lift her shirt, enjoying the sight of her soft, smooth skin. A bump was visible, normally hidden by doctor’s coats or jackets.

Unable to help myself after her shirt was off and she stood before me in her bra and jeans, I lowered my head to place heated kisses on her collarbone. I teased the skin causing her to moan breathily and press closer to me.

I placed one last kiss as I continued with my original intention which was to have her completely naked for my eyes. My fingers crawled up her backside as I undid the latch of her bra. She held out her arms as I sensually slid the straps down, my touch lingering on every inch of available skin. Goose pimples popped up on her flesh.

I cupped her breasts in my hands. The areola had darkened slightly and her breasts were a bit fuller. The size was still just right for my hands. She stepped closer, pushing them further into my
hands. I squeezed and massaged the soft masses as I maneuvered myself behind her, her head fell back onto my shoulder. My lips trailed down the column of her neck. My nose brushed against her skin and I felt her shiver against me as I nuzzled into her warmth.

My hands worked themselves lower to her waist and to the front of her jeans where I unfastened the button and unzipped her pants. I pushed them down and it was a bit tricky getting them off, but we did it.

My fingers danced across her skin until one slipped inside of her panties, reaching the apex of her thighs, and slipping past the thatch of curls covering her sex. She was putty in my hands.

“Do ye want me?” I asked her.

She nodded, her eyes closed as a finger entered her. I explored and was thrilled at how ready she was for me. I pulled my hand back. “Finish undressing me,” I asked of her.

Her eyes were a dark, dangerous brown as she set tantalizing, unhurried pace for removing my pants. Her small hands fumbled with the button and zipper before sliding my jeans all the way down. She stared up at me with dilated pupils and eyes full of promise for the illicit things we were going to do to each other.

She stood back up at me, although my height still eclipsed hers by several inches. I brought her hand down to where I ached with arousal for her. “This is coileach,” I told her boldly. “Broin,” I informed as I trailed a finger along the top of her breasts.

Her breaths were heavy as my finger lingered on her nipples. “Cnapan,” her eyes focused on my movements as I teased her more and more, she was impatient when it came to sex. She loved a good seduction, but she could only deal with foreplay for so long before she exploded from all the tension.

Claire finally decided to take it into her own hands as I was too slow for her. She shoved my boxers down and fell to her knees as she took me into her mouth. I moaned as my fingers ran through her hair, raking through the soft curls. “Oh Dhia,” I groaned, struggling not to fall to my knees as she took me deeper.

My eyes squeezed shut as I succumbed to the pleasure of her mouth. My teeth clenched almost painfully as my neck arched. Just as I nearly came, she stopped and kissed her way up the slope of my body. She was making it clear it wasn’t all about my pleasure.

Her panties seemed to disappear in a flurry as we made our way to the bed. The wind rattled the windows as it raged outside. Raindrops began to fall not too long afterwards, and weren’t particularly hurried as they made their trek down the window panes. In the distance, I spotted the ocean that not so long ago was calm, but wrestled against the rocks in massive waves.

As soon as I penetrated, I felt her spasm around me and halted my movements. “Jamie,” she murmured, her voice full of love and devotion, which she previously denied herself. She relaxed as her legs fell open, offering herself to me, allowing me to claim her as my own and me as hers as if we hadn’t already done that in the past.

I arrived at the conclusion we were imprinted on one another’s souls. We couldn’t move on because there was only the one person out there for us, although we were too blind to see it.

My strokes were slow and lazy as I wanted it to last forever and it seemed as if each second really was our own personal forever. “Faster,” she commanded me.

My pace quickened as I plunged in deeper, hitting new angles, giving her all she asked. I stared
down into her eyes, which were on me. I saw my whole world in those sparkling orbs. The
tightness was building in my groan, but I held back from my release as I lowered my mouth to
hers.

My lips tingled at the sensation of her lips moving in sync with my own. Her tongue poked out,
tracing my bottom lip. I gasped and she slid it all the way in to find mine ready for hers. I couldn’t
focus any longer and wrenched my mouth away as I grasped the headboard and I drove in her,
finally finding my release as she did hers.

She clenched painfully around me as her walls fluttered. She whimpered, which then turned into a
fully blown scream as I plunged into her one last time. “I love you,” she said as I collapsed on top
of her, still inside of her. Her hands played with the curls at the nape of my neck. “I haven’t
stopped.”

I placed a kiss on her breast. “I ken,” because I felt the same way about her. Perhaps Jenny wasn’t
wrong after my break up on New Year’s Eve. Some things fall apart only for better things to come
together even better than before. “Ye’re my everything, a ghràidh.”

I dozed there on top of her, living in the moment of her surrounding me. “Go to sleep my love, I’ll
still be here.”

Whisper that you love me
That you'll never leave me
Be mine for always
I'll be yours forever

-Tell Me, Johnny Jewel

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys! Sorry for the long delay, but I moved into a new house and finally went
back to Virginia. It's been pretty busy. Luckily, Florence skipped right over us except
for a little rain. I also have a new kitten who is a menace, but I love her.
Interlude: Grace

Chapter Summary

More snapshots from Jamie's life in the last nine years.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

*Said I loved you without hesitation*

So easy for you to break my foolish heart
Now I wonder if you ever speak my name
Will I always be defined by my mistakes?

April 2010

The screaming and laughter of children reminded me of the two I left back in Boston. Their cousins rolled down the hill, screeching happily as they hit the bottom and then ran back to the top.

They each were innocent and reaming with life. There was an abundance of joy and love radiating from them as they urged me to participate, to play with them.

I couldn’t find any energy to go over to them. I was simply too tired to indulge their youthful fun.

A chuckled escaped my lips, surprising not only me, but Jenny as well. She stared at me almost as if I were an alien from another planet. “Did ye…?”

Laughter was a rarity for me these days as I found so little in life to make me laugh.

“Aye, I did.” My retort was short and sharp.

Jenny sucked in a quick breath. I felt terrible for the way I treated her as she was only trying to help me through this difficult transition from family man, husband, and provider to just me. I was alone for the first time in years. Sure I had my sister and her children and Ian as well, but they were still her family first.

“Ye could go back,” Jenny suggested, but I immediately shook my head in disagreement. Going back would be like admitting to Claire she was right. I needed her, but she didn’t need me. If there was anything I didn’t want to prove to her, it was my dependence and reliance upon her in my life.

I needed some more time, but I knew it was possible I could more than just survive without her.

“Can I ask ye a question brother?” I didn’t know why she was asking.

I rolled my eyes. “Janet Murray, nothing has ever stopped ye before from meddling.”
Her cheeks flamed in embarrassment and at the admonishment in my tone. She was interfering, and I knew it was her best intentions at heart. Yet still, I was old enough as to where my mistakes weren’t fixed by my sister’s involvement.

“If ye kent ye loved her and wanted to spend yer life with her, why did ye allow her to think something happened between ye and that coworker of hers?”

I hadn’t informed her about Britney, but she broached the subject within weeks of my arrival at Lallybroch. She made it clear her opinion on the subject and reproached me more than once about my behavior as her brother was not some cad. He was faithful and deserving of the trust placed in him.

I confessed to her it was nothing more than friendship on my part, but Britney had ulterior designs and expressed a few or several times her interest in me, especially as I previously confided some of my marital issues. It was a venting session as she shared her struggles with her boyfriend whom she broke up with not too much later.

“Jamie, it doesnae take much for a female to think ye have an interest in her. If ye give her some attention as innocent as it may be, she could take it the wrong way. I’m not saying all of us are like that, but some women are always looking for a new man.” Her tone was patient, but her eyes showed me she was a bit furious. “From the sounds of it, she broke up with her boyfriend because she grew to have feelings for ye.”

I stared at her in disbelief at how she could reach such a conclusion. “Ye cannae possibly ken that from the bits I’ve shared with ye.”

She shook her head at me and patted my hand sympathetically. “Ye’re not a woman. Her boyfriend wasnae giving her the attention she thought she deserved, but ye were there to lend an ear. Ye shared with her yer own private troubles, which probably made her feel good. Ye were discontent and tense, so ye let her give ye back rubs and bring lunch, which ye told me yerself, that the two of ye ate together. Do ye see where I’m going with this bampot?” I scowled at the unnecessary insult to my intelligence.

“I wasnae are that offering friendship was saying I’m interested.”

“T’is why ye have me tae inform ye of such things. Some women dinnae take no for an answer, and willnae hesitate to try and take another woman’s partner.”

My shoulder slumped in disappointment because Claire was right. I hadn’t told her so because it would be admitting my own inability to detect Britney conniving behavior. “I havenae told Claire this but Britney made a move the weekend she...” I couldn’t finish the sentence without tears stabbing at my eyes. My heart clenched painfully thinking about the fight and her eventual miscarriage while I wasn’t there to support her.

“She told me she put out feelers to see if I was interested in her and assumed since I hadn’t rejected any of her prior advances, I had feelings for her. She kissed me.”

“Did ye kiss her back?”

The truth was yes. Only for a second before I pushed her away in abject horror at what I had done. I inadvertently led another woman on while my wife was pregnant with our third bairn. It dinnae matter how soon after our last one, he was coming.

“Not even a second later, I pushed her away, but it dinnae stop me from feeling an immense about of guilt.” I cried. “Claire was having a miscarriage and I wasnae there.”
Jenny rocked me in her arms. “Jamie, ye cannae continue to go on this way.” I sobbed at the loss of my child, my marriage, my best friend, and for my daughters who had know idea why their family life suddenly changed. It was surreal because in one moment it was as if I was at the top of the world, and then the next I was buried under mounds of rubble without the slightest possibility of seeing the sun again.

“Ye let some hoor with loose morals work her way into yer marriage. I must admit Claire shared her worries about this friend of yers.”

It was news to me. She wasn’t generally the most open person about what she was feeling at least if it was a negative emotion. She was a mosaic filled with all of these pieces, I was still putting together.

There was no mistaking the enjoyment I felt in the task because it was worth it. If there was anything I wanted her to understand, it was that she was completely worth every single moment of the life we shared together, the happiness, the sorrow, the loss, and everything else in between.

I palmed the grass, felt the soft tendrils glide through my fingers as I enjoyed the first real day of spring after the fading of winter’s thaw. The sun’s rays warmed my skin, perhaps not as much as it would in Boston, but it reminded me of easier days gone past when there were no worries in life. When I had my ma and da, my brother and sister, and we all lived here oblivious to what was ahead of us.

My eyes closed as I stayed in the moment. “It isnae as if I havenae thought of returning, but I think I need to be here for the moment. I have to figure out who I am without her by my side. We’ve been together in one way or another since we were sixteen. We broke up once in the entire time aside from ye ken…” I gestured not wanting to say the word divorce out loud.

It was an embarrassment, my personal mark of shame as no one in our family was divorced, quite a remarkable feat and perhaps the reason why I wasn’t all too forthcoming about my own.

My remaining relatives rallied around me, and expressed their sentiments of sorrow for the dissolution of my marriage. Others, however practically threw in my face I deserved it for marrying a Sassenach as they were outsiders and would never understand what it was like to be us.

I waved them off as they were the more zealous members who championed regularly for independence from what they viewed as our oppressor.

“Aye, ah remember well the first time ye called it off. Was it nae yer first year of university?” She knew it was. I took a semester off as a result and made it up during two summers as a result.

“Weel, it wasn’t as if we were perfect. We’ve always had our faults and issues with one another.” She stared at me long and hard, trying to reach into the depths of my soul to determine what it was I was feeling. Sometimes I wasn’t entirely sure what was going on inside of my head and heart. The ache was acute and always present, a reminder of the past. Some days it was a duller pain, but it was there.

Jenny laid back onto the grass and stared up at the clouds. They were blobs for me as I lost my inspiration for everything. “Maybe it wasnae time for ye. Sometimes it takes doing the wrong thing to figure out the right thing.”

I didn’t understand what she was telling me at all and remained silent, contemplative.

She shook her head, brown strands falling loose around her face. Sometimes she appeared far
older than she actually was. She was nearly thirty in a few months with a bunch of young children to account for her adult years. She clearly worked out what I still couldn’t see.

“Do ye remember how ma used tae tell us all those stories about tragic lovers?” I frowned at her, ready to argue immediately in defense of my previous relationship. “Hold yer tongue for a minute as I explain. It isnae always clear why some people go so easy together and others nae so much, but often the problem is they fall in love at the wrong time.” Her eyes tracked the figures of her rolling children in the short distance and a beautiful smile lit up her features. Her eyes squinted and sparkled, her posture wasn’t stiff, and there was something carefree about her.

“Ma always said ye would find yerself a girl and attach yerself for the rest of yer life. Ye were the type tae truly love once in yer life, and maybe she was right. I dinnae ken, but I think ye need to find yer own way. The past holds memories but the future is unknown. She could be there again some day. I dinnae want ye to give up yer life. I love her like a sister, but ye’re my brother. I need ye around ye ken?”

Her face was serious as she asked her request of me. I couldn’t disappoint her. I’d done nothing but that since returning to the family estate. “Okay Jenny,” it was all I could say to appease her.

In the eyes of a saint I'm a stranger
We're all trying to find a way
At the death of every darkness there’s a morning
Though we all try
We all try
We're all one step from grace

July 2010

I fidgeted nervously as I watched the arrivals board in the airport. It was actually happening, despite my misgivings about Claire’s promises. It wasn’t fair of me to doubt her, but I was apprehensive about the amount of time I missed. Sadly, Brianna couldn’t make the trip as she was still too young to be separated from her mother.

Julia was escorting Isla across the Atlantic, the two had a layover in London, during which they stayed with Tom for two days. On her way back home, Julia would stay with Tom for a longer holiday.

She was in the process of moving to Boston to help Claire with the girls as her residency recently began. Brianna was in daycare in the interim period and probably would remain so even when her grandmother returned.

Jenny not so gently nudged my side to stop my nervous movements. I glared at her, but she pointedly ignored it in favor of texting Ian to check on her children again. She trusted Ian, however it was rare when he was left with all the children by himself. They were tricky lads and lasses with extremely mischievous natures which activated their mother was no longer within a one mile radius from them.

“Stop it,” she commanded as I shifted my weight to my other side yet again. “Ye act as if ye’ve never seen yer own child or talked to her.”

Conversations with Isla were interesting, especially with the expansion of her vocabulary as of
late. New words were constantly introduced, which she found ways to incorporate into our phone calls. She was a chip off the old block, not mine, but her mother’s.

Claire sent a constant stream of pictures with at least one every day. It was hard to gage from the pictures how much she had grown since she was so small.

I buried my hands in my pockets to prevent her from seeing the twitching. It was a big deal, Claire trusting me with our daughter for so long without her in a close vicinity. Isla had never left Massachusetts in her life and her first trip on a plane was to somewhere far away from what she knew. I was worried she would get homesick and beg to go home within the week.

She was only staying for three weeks. We both agreed any longer than that for the moment might not be ideal for her. She was starting pre-school near the end of August and her mother wanted her on an established routine before then.

It didn’t matter our time was somewhat short as I planned to relish and bask in every single moment together. I could scarcely believe nearly a year had passed since I last held her in my arms. I would’ve flown in for the holidays, but it was a dark time for me. I wasn’t in a state to be around anyone really, especially if I had to see Claire.

I spotted Julia almost immediately and at her side was a toddler pulling eagerly on her hand as she made her way across the airport.

I sucked in a breath at the sight of my little girl because she had grown. I could see some extra inches were added to her height and I knew her warm weight would feel heavier in my arms. Her hair was darkening somewhat from the lighter shade was born with. Julia smiled in mild amusement as her granddaughter dragged her and then dropped her hand the moment she saw me.

“DAHDEE!!!!” She yelled excitedly as she ran full throttle towards me.

“She’s certainly yers,” Jenny remarked. I shot her glare before catching Isla in my arms. Her legs wrapped around my waist as she snuggled her into the crevice between my neck and shoulder. I was right about the added weight to her frame. It was amazing how much change occurred. Our video chats showed the maturing of her face, but I didn’t personally see any of the other physical changes in her body. “Missed you,” she said in her clear Bostonian accent. It had an almost posh sound to it like Claire’s, but there was something distinctly American about it.

“I missed ye as well, mo chridhe.” My lips planted themselves in her hair as I inhaled her baby shampoo. She was a solid mass in my arms and completely mine for the time being.

“Hello Jamie,” Julia greeted me tentatively.

From the moment I met her, I respected her immensely. She raised two children on her own as a nurse, not relying on the money from her husband’s estate and life insurance policy to sustain her. She believed in good old fashioned hard work for getting what you want. She set aside the money for her children in accounts where it would accrue interest.

I was slight off kilter at seeing her again as it occurred with a slight pang, I last saw her when we buried my son. “Hello Julia, I hope ye’re well?”

“Oh quite, well I can’t stay long sadly. My flight leaves in about thirty minutes. I wish I could chat with you longer,” her eyes conveyed her sincerity. She wasn’t just a mother-in-law but a mother to me. She was aware of her boundaries as far as the placement of my own mother in my life, but she was there for me whenever I needed her.
“Thank ye,” I told her. She cupped my face, kissed my cheek, and shared a fond smile. She hugged Jenny as well.

Isla was back on the ground, hugging her grandmother and promising to be a good girl. “Tell Bee Bee I miss her, ‘kay?”

“I will love. Behave for your old dad because he isn’t used to the sorts of things you get into now.” She turned her head away innocently as if the accusations against her were completely false and a slight on her good name. “I mean it Isla, or Santa might not bring lots of toys this year.”

Isla gasped seriously and planted her hands on her grandmother’s shoulders. “I pwomise, I be good. No worry ‘bout me. Give mommy a kiss for me.”

She made strides in her speech development and spoke in complete sentences. “Kiss all my dollies too since I only brought one. I love you lots and mommy and Bee Bee. Baseball game when I get back?”

Julia kissed her head and agreed to Isla’s wish.

Isla turned around to me and Jenny with expectant eyes. “This is yer Aunt Jenny, my sister like Bree is yer sister.”

She turned on her charm instantly and Jenny was smitten with the girl even though she three of her own. Perhaps it was something about your sibling’s kids.

She scurried behind my leg and poked her head out shyly to sneak a peek at the new stranger. I hadn’t figured her as someone shy, but she was older now, perhaps more wary of people she didn’t know. “Come on ladybug, she won’t harm ye.”

________________________

I made myself believe
There was no fight left in me
But redemption doesn't fall down at your feet

________________________

April 2012

The opulence and grandeur of my surroundings hardly fazed me as I was accustomed to these lavish parties my cousin threw. He viewed himself as worldly, especially as business was booming. Wine was his specialty.

Jared was known for his extravagance and practically oozing his wealth for all to see. He truly meant no harm, but as a Scottish man residing in France, he wanted to fit in with the wealthy people of Paris. He regularly attended the opera and had box tickets to the ballet.

The ballroom was decorated tastefully with fancy draperies hanging across the room and candles lit everywhere to provide mood lighting. String lights were strung across the ceiling with crystal chandeliers as the centerpieces of the room. Men and women were dressed in their best. Men were adorned in their black tie, while women wore elegant ball gowns, most likely perfectly crafted for them by some designer or another.

Masks hid the faces of all those attending. Waiters passed by frequently with hors d’oeuvres on their trays or glasses of wine.
People mingled politely as the place reeked with sophistication. It was nothing personal against my cousin just generally it wasn’t my type of party. I was used to smaller, more intimate parties with family and close friends.

“Du vin?” I was thankful for my aptitude with languages and the semester I studied here during university.

“Oui, merci,” I thanked the waiter as I plucked the glass of wine from the train.

Jenny talked me into attending the event as she believed I needed to get out of the country for a bit and visit our country in France. Over two years passed since I left America, and yet my mind was plagued with memories from the past, preventing me from moving on, at least in her opinion. She wanted me to open my heart again, but I wasn’t all too fond of the idea.

Jared invited me as we were beginning to discuss him investing in my business plans for a brewery. He already had some connections, especially in distribution and I did need the money for the start up. I had a few people interested in capitalizing on the opportunity, but with his assistance it could actually be seen to fruition.

I sipped at my wine as I watched the guests move onto the dance floor at the start of the music. Jared hired live musicians with instruments who began playing the faint notes of a waltz.

I attended the event stag, although Jenny encouraged me to put myself out there and meet someone even if it was just company for the night. Dinnae stick yer cock in the first thing ye see. She warned with the unending and unnerving patience of hers.

She slid into the room without anyone noticing her, but I did. Her brown hair was lightly curled and partially pinned back. Her cream and roses complexion complimented her quite nicely. She was fair. From the distance between us, I couldn’t make out her eye color or any other details about her except she was absolutely beautiful. I wasn’t sure it was the right word to describe her either.

The dress was what initially drew my eyes to her. Most people had gone for more standard ballroom gown dresses, but she dressed to shine or at least star in the minds of the men in the room. It was a satin, strapless, lace-up dress with pleats, but it was the color, which drew me like a moth to the flame. It was bright red.

She was dazzling, although she stayed close to the edges of the room like a wall flower. From what I could tell at least the parts of her face not covered by her black mask, she was far too gorgeous not to be in the thick of it all.

I began my slow approach and watched her as several men came up to her and asked for a dance. Her billowing dress kept them from coming too close.

I stopped several feet from her and I felt an unnatural hum surround me. I hadn’t felt the stirrings of it since the day I signed my divorce papers. It was how I recognized whenever Claire was near.

Maybe it was a sign she wasn’t the only one out there for me. I approached her after she rejected the last man. “Bonsoir,” I greeted her, proud my Scottish accent wasn’t noticeable. “Tu es trés belle,” I told her and watched the blush creep up her neck.

“Je vous remercie,” there was something her tone that itched at my memories but I couldn’t place it.

“Es-tu seul?” I was interested in whether or not the beauty of the night was by herself, or if there was a man or I guess a woman waiting for her to join them.
“Oui, il n’y a personne d’autre.” Her French was fairly impressive, although I was almost all too sure it wasn’t her first language, or if it was she didn’t speak it regularly.

I swallowed back the bile threatening to make an exit. It was nerve wracking talking to this woman who captivated me so easily. “Veux tu danser avec moi?”

She nodded her assent at my offer. She took my arm as I held it out for her. I couldn’t stop staring at her. There was something mesmerizing and I was simply spellbound by her.

“Quel est ton nom?” I had to know. I needed something to call her.

She bit at her lip nervously, and my eyes automatically tracked the movement. Her red lipstick accentuated her lips and highlighted just how fair her skin was. “Je m’appele…”she paused as if considering her own name. “Elizabeth,” she finally answered. “Et tu?”

It was the wrong time to find myself reminded of her. Yet, my thoughts drifted to Claire as always as Elizabeth was her middle name.

“Alexander, mais tu peux m’appeler Alex.”

She gulped and nodded her head as I lead her around the dance floor. She was actually very good on her feet, and didn’t need much leading from me. I sensed she was merely humoring me.

3 hours later

Her body slammed against the door of her hotel room as my lips remained firmly attached to hers. Our movements were heated and hurried as she tried her best to slide the keycard. As soon as our lips connected, I knew the night would end only one way.

The door opened and then closed with a loud thud as I backed her into the darkened room. She stopped me as I tried to turn on the light. “Pas de lumières,” her voice a husky whisper.

My lips were soon buried in the delicate skin of her neck as I sucked and nipped at the sensitive skin. She shivered under my ministrations. Our masks were still firmly in place and the lights were turned off in her hotel room. She wanted this to be a one night meeting as she wasn’t local and didn’t have the time to maintain relationships. I was fine with it and kissed my agreement to her swollen lips.

I unzipped the dress that had driven me crazy all night. It pooled around her feet and she stood before me in almost all of her naked glory. She wore a scrap of lace, but there was no bra. They were naturally that perky. She moved to cover herself self-consciously, but I halted her movements and admired her beauty.

“Très jolie,” I whispered softly to her.

The only light in the room was from the city outside of our window. I surged forward and my lips met hers. I sunk my tongue into her mouth and she moaned in surprise by my forwardness, not that she was all too bothered as her hands began their descent into my pants.

My skin burned with desire at her hesitant touch. So much of her reminded my of my former wife, which was terrible. If anything, I shouldn’t be in the room, yet desire clouded my brain. I wanted this woman so very badly.

Ours bodies were pressed so close together, it was hard to know where one began and the other ended. Her skin was so warm and bonny.
Her nimble fingers began the arduous task of unbuttoning my shirt. I was shocked she wasn’t bothered enough just to rip it. “Je ne veux pas gâcher ta chemise.”

With each button undone, she placed a kiss on my neck as her lips traveled further down. Her eyes were a beautiful shade of brown as she looked up at me. “Tu es beau.”

I couldn’t believe this was actually happening as I shed my pants and followed her to the bed. “Alex,” she moaned as I placed kisses down the length of her body. It was all so smooth and smelled so wonderful like roses. “Non,” she pulled me towards her. “Pas nécessaire,” she informed me, and I knew it was true. I could smell her arousal, the way she could feel my own.

I was ready to burst, and if she felt a fraction of the way I did, she was a powder keg ready to explode.

My fingers explored what lay under the thatch of dark colored curls to find she was so wet. She was more than prepared for the moment I slid myself to the hilt into her body. Her eyes were hooded, hiding the smoky brown color that intoxicated me like a fine whiskey.

I wanted it all from her. I wanted to know about her family, where she grew up, what she did for a living, her hobbies, everything. I pulled out, only to slide back in causing both of us to cry out in pleasure. Her hands roamed my backside and urged me to continue. Her touch was electric, charging me with each fervent touch.

I brought my lips back to hers, and she pressed harder deepening the kiss as I slowed my strokes. I wanted the moment to last as long as possible because I had one night with the magnificent creature underneath me. Her eyes drifted shut as she gave herself over to me.

Her hands cupped her breasts. The nipples were a nice, rosy color, it went perfectly with her creamy skin. She groaned as I teased and kneaded them. Her head tossed back as the passion overcame her. Her face was one of ecstasy.

Her muscles clenched almost painfully along my length, but I held back my orgasm. “Tu peux jouir,” I nearly did at her exclamation. I hadn’t expected her to allow me the privilege of cumming inside of her. “Non l’enfants,” she said, her voice a throaty alto. She was losing control quickly, and I knew with a few more strokes and my fingers, she would be there soon enough.

It started as a soft fluttering until she clamped down fully on me, milking me for all I’m worth as I released inside of her. She whimpered and cried out “Alex,” as she reached her climax.

I bit into the juncture of her neck to prevent myself from calling out another woman’s name. There was honestly nothing worse in the world I could do at the moment than say the name of the woman I last had sexual relations. Elizabeth didn’t deserve that sort of treatment from me, nor the regret she chose the wrong guy to share her night with. I continued spasming into her, and she rubbed my back, encouraging me as I finished.

We fell asleep, but I woke an hour later and slipped into my clothes and out of her room. I stared at the lonely stranger and felt wisps of shame overwhelm me. I needed the connection of another human, but it shouldn’t have been like that. I felt as if I used the poor woman.

In the half life
Rains the hand to my defeat
And I watched the walls fall
And I rebuilt them piece by piece
Dr. Clarkson waited patiently for me. She was always easygoing and allowed me to lead our sessions. Occasionally, there was something in particular she wanted to focus on, but most of the time the decision was up to me.

“I’m nae sure I’m ready for this,” I finally admitted. “How can I ken it’s right?”

Four months ago I met a woman. I was attracted to her, but we started out as friends. Last week I finally asked her out, unable to take the underlying tension between us. Everyone was constantly commenting on our status and if Claire could move on, it was time for me to do so as well.

She put down her pad and smiled at me softly. She tucked a strand of her strawberry blonde hair behind her ear as she silently regarded me. “Jamie, I think you’re well aware that there aren’t any guarantees in life. We put ourselves out there knowing there’s potential for us to get hurt. However, we don’t have the benefit of hindsight until an event has passed. If you knew everything from the beginning to end about your relationship with Claire, would you have still pursued her?”

It was a tricky question. “Probably, although I would’ve changed how some things happened.”

“Oh Jamie,” she chuckled, not in a mean way, but to express her fondness. “We all would like to think so, but it’s those hardships who define us. If we went back and changed every single little negative detail, then we wouldn’t be the people currently sitting in this office. Those acts turned us into ourselves, and we have to accept it.”

I absorbed the full impact of her words and the all the things which she didn’t say but implied. “There’s a risk in everything ye do. Ye have tae choose sometimes what's worth it. We all get some good and bad, but at the end of the day we get to choose whether or not begin again the next.”

“I’m nervous,” my voice was a bit shaky. “It’s like giving up on the possibility of…” I trailed off letting her fill in the blanks for herself.

She leaned forward, her eyes calculating. “I get ye’ll always have feelings for her, but at the same time ye cannæ put yer life on hold. Ye deserve the same opportunity as she does tae move on with yer life. If there’s a chance for ye and her, well then it’ll come.”

I leaned back and sank into the cushions of the couch as my heart heard what she was saying. I didn’t have to fully let go of her, however I shouldn’t give her this sort of power over my life.

“Do ye still feel guilt about the last time ye had affairs with someone?” It was the kindest way she could’ve phrased what happened between me and Elizabeth in Paris.

The truth was I did feel awful about it. I used the woman to scratch an itch and allowed me attraction and lust to guide me when I should've used my head instead. I’d never done anything like that in my entire life. “A part of me always will.”

“Let’s talk about what scares ye about being in a relationship again?”

“Weel I am terrified of disappointing someone again. What if we get serious and she wants children? I also dinnae ken how ah can put my heart out there again.”
“Jamie in the end it’s all up tae ye. Ye can come up with all of these reasons, but it’s really ye stopping it. Ye’ve worked hard tae get here and made so much progress from our first session until now. I want ye to think about what we’ve talked about and if dating is something ye’re interested, or if ye’re really doing this because ye want to get one up on Claire?”

My mouth fell open in shock. “That’s what I thought. Dinnae hurt someone who doesnae deserve it if ye’re not serious about it. It’ll hurt ye and her in the end, which I dinnae think ye want.”

She was right as usual. “Ye’re right. I’ve got a lot tae consider.”

May 2018

Somehow Jenny and I were in the same place again, watching her children. Although this time, the younger ones were the only ones participating. Maggie, Jamie, and Kitty were on a blanket surrounded by books and class notes. They had exams in a few weeks.

Jamie and I would be headed back to the city at the end of the weekend as I was currently fostering him so he could attend the school he wanted in Edinburgh. Through his marks, he earned himself a scholarship that covered his tuition and his parents paid for his room and board. As a way to earn some pocket money, he worked in the pub on weekends.

Michael, Janet, and Ian played merrily. I could almost picture their siblings not too long ago in their place. It was as if one day they all sprouted up like weeds. Ian often felt left behind by his siblings as their was the nearly five year gap between him and the twins. Jamie was eleven by then and Maggie recently turned nine. It was a huge adjustment as they thought their parents were done having children. The three of them were all teenagers and the twins were eleven. It was hard to believe so much time passed.

“So… did Isla ever forgive her sister for tattling?”

While I had made it clear to my daughters I would deal with Isla’s behavior, Brianna told her mother. Isla found herself grounded for a week and had to write an apology letter, which she sent to me and I forwarded to Ally.

I apologized for the manner in which I ended our relationship, but she said it wasn’t only Isla’s words. It was the final nail, but she had the feeling I was as invested as she was despite the amount of time we dated. I may have loved her, but she deserved to be loved the way I had my ex-wife. She deserved someone who wanted children and wasn’t cowardly enough to dismiss the possibility when she mentioned it. It was also my apprehension to introducing my children when they visited.

“Aye, it was nae easy for her to forgive the lass.”

Jenny hummed as her eyes narrowed on a brewing altercation between Michael and Ian. “When are the girls arriving?”

“Second week of June, the tickets have been booked. They leave their last day of school.”

She nodded as she sharply called out her sons’ names. It was a first warning, and they knew they didn’t want her to come over there to sort them out. “I cannae believe how big Brianna is getting. She’s almost the height of her sister. She also looks more like ma with each year.” Jenny was right about that. Brianna did take more after our side than her sister did.

I still saw her mother in her, but in Isla, aside from the red hair she was practically pure Claire. “How come ye dinnae move back?”
It was something I considered more than one time over the years, especially as the girls were getting older and older. They were entering years when I wanted to be more actively present in their lives. “I’ve thought about it.” In truth, I was closer to finalizing a decision because I was tired of missing their lives.

Their mother and I had issues, but it shouldn’t affect my relationship with my children. The distance was more than a problem as half the time I heard about poor behavior and discipline secondhand from the girls. I didn’t even have a direct role in punishing them.

“Ye ken ye should talk to Claire. She’s nae petty. If ye wanted to move closer to the girls, a suitable arrangement could be fixed.” I knew Jenny and Claire were still in regular, not awkward or stilted, contact with one another. They spoke at least once a week according to Maggie.

It was actually quite warm outside for Scotland. “I havenae made any decisions yet. I just want to be apprised of my options. Besides I want tae talk to the girls about it before I mention it to Claire.”

Her name still sent shivers down my spine and tingles in my nerves. Her name alone had the power to heal and destroy me all at the same time. It wasn’t healthy, but I learned to accept there simply some things I couldn’t change. One of them was how I reacted to her.

“Do ye remember the masquerade ball ye attended a few years back?”

A frown formed on my face at my recollection of the night in question. I never disclosed the full details of what happened to her because I didn’t want to hear her self-righteousness. I loved my sister, but I was also aware of her faults. I gave a firm nod instead of a vocal reply as my throat seemed to dry up.

“Weel I kent I made ye go, but I was hoping ye’d run into a friend of mine.”

My eyebrows scaled my forehead. “Wh-what!?”

She rolled her head nervously as she began to crack all of her fingers. It was a nervous habit of hers. I remembered my ma scolding her more than once about it. She hated the sound. “Aye, but she told me she met someone else that night instead. T’is a pity as I thought it would work between ye. She and Jared were acquaintances, and she regularly donates to charities.” Jenny shrugged her shoulders.

“What made ye ask about it?”

“I saw yer mask when I was cleaning the attic the other day.” There was something suspicious about her asking regardless of the mask. Why would she care if I didn’t meet some friend of hers? I wasn’t a huge fan of many of the woman she formerly associated with as they were notorious gossips. “It was on my mind is all. Ye only said it was an unforgettable night. I ken ye needed the time.”

Try as I could, it was one night I still couldn’t let go. I wished I knew what happened to Elizabeth.

_In the eyes of a saint I'm a stranger_  
We're all trying to find a way  
At the death of every darkness there's a morning  
Though we all try  
We all try  
We're all one step from grace
My French is a tad rusty, but I think it's good for the most part.

Translations

du vin- wine

Bonsour, tu es très belle- good evening you're very beautiful

Je vous remercie- thank you

Es-tu seul?- Are you alone?

Oui, il n'y a personne d'autre- yes, there is no one else

Veux tu danser avec moi?- Want to dance with me?

Quel es ton nom?- What is your name?

Je m'appelle- My name is (although it actually translates to I'm called, but you never literally translate.)

Mais tu peux m'appeler Alex- But you can call me Alex

Pas de lumières- No lights

Très jolie- very beautiful

Pas nécessaire- Not necessary

Tu peux jouir- You can cum/enjoy

Non l'enfants- no children

Chapter End Notes

Also since some readers have already shown concern, Jamie doesn't have any children that weren't conceived with Claire.
JPOV

It was an arousing sight, but my movements were sluggish. I ached all over from something I caught from Brianna. She was laid up in her bed as well with a flu bug as well. I wanted nothing more than to ravish Claire.

Claire actually slept in the guest room last night as she was more susceptible to sickness at the moment, and the last thing she needed was any sort of virus. She was miserable in the past when she contracted something while sick. Isla stayed over at her grandmother’s who was responsible for dropping her off at school.

At nearly four months, she was actually showing more than a little bit now. I was surprised at how she grew with each passing week. We had another ultrasound coming up in another week where we could find out the gender and how the baby was doing. She recently had to shopping to supplement her wardrobe as many of her clothes were too tight. Her dress was a black shift dress and hugged her curves deliciously, and she wore my mother’s pearls around her neck. She offered to give them back when we divorced, but I couldn’t accept them as they were meant for her. Even if she never wore them again, she would eventually pass them down to one of our daughters.

I watched as she sensuously slid her legs into her pantyhose and slowly rolled them up her creamy legs. “Do ye have to go?” She jumped in surprise and turned around with a startled expression.

“Issa,” she placed a hand over her heart. “You scared me. You know I can’t. I know you don’t like my long hours at the hospital, but it’s only for a few more months. Then I’m going on maternity leave and when that finishes, I’ll be on sabbatical for a year.” We’d discussed the situation thoroughly more than once as I tried to confirm more than one occasion if it was what she actually wanted or what she thought she wanted to appease me. I would never force her to choose between her work or her family as they both brought meaning to her life in different ways. She deserved to feel fulfilled in all aspects of her life.

It wasn’t entirely fair of me to question her schedule as I supported her decision to eventually follow a medical career and as she chose surgery as her specialty. I hated to ask her to take off more time as she really didn’t have any sick leave left unless specifically mandated by her doctor as she had used much of it for Isla, and all of her vacation time was gone as well.

She needed to get through the remaining months until maternity leave. It was still some time from now as she didn’t plan to leave until somewhere around her eighth month. Her doctor didn’t see anything wrong with her decision and would let us know if it were a risk to the baby or not. So far her pregnancy was smooth sailing, and there were no signs of anything wrong. By the eighth month it would be more of consults, paperwork, and monitoring her residents and overseeing
I sighed as I stared at her. Ever since we physically reconnected, it was rare for me not to be at her house. I was here more than I was at my own apartment, but the lease I had was for a year. I didn’t want to pay extra to break it. Luckily it came furnished, so that wasn’t a huge issue for me. I only had my clothes and personal belongings I brought over with me from Scotland.

We had my house in Edinburgh, which I had closed for the time being. All of the utilities and gas were turned off, and Jenny would stop by every now and then to check on the house. I figured we could use the house in the summer and when we visited my family. I hadn’t fully discussed it all with her as there were some topics we purposely avoided. I didn’t want her to view the house as me holding onto something in case it didn’t work out between us.

The flat was also nice to have for the moments when Claire required her space. There times where she simply needed a clear head and I went to my flat. Or if there was a misunderstanding between us, we spent the night apart to give us each some time to settle down before we attempted apologizing. We never left a fight still angry at one another because it wasn’t conducive, but we were aware enough to recognize we shouldn’t force anything.

We weren’t going to compromise who we were for the other because that’s not the point of a relationship. I don’t want her to feel she has to change to be some version of herself she thinks I want. I accepted her faults and all for who she was.

The physically intimate aspect of our relationship was the easy part. The emotional aspect was still immensely difficult for the both of us as we coveted our secrets and rights to privacy. I had no right to question her on who she’s been with since our divorce in the same way she had no right to ask about my previous partners.

If we were willing to share, which we compromised on, then it was fine, but it wasn’t fair to either of us to expect the other to come out right and list any and everyone. There were only three women in all of these years, and a beautiful woman like Claire had at least one other besides Peter.

I understood despite a part of me that seethed on the inside at the thought of her with another man. While I was her first and certainly her forever, I wasn’t mature enough to be her constant.

It sort of ached, but I knew she was in good hands with Peter. Despite his inability to fully let her go, he treated her and the girls well, and he was honestly in love with him.

I knew without her saying so she was very much in love with him. Perhaps it wasn’t as strong as ours, but I didn’t want her to deny the time she spent with him because he wasn’t a bad guy. His only crime was falling in love with one of the most remarkable women who had lots of baggage. We weren’t living in the past as twenty something adults who were just starting out in life. Sometimes things fall apart so better things come together as cliché as it sounds.

She slipped into her heels, although I knew at the soonest opportunity she would change into her trainers because her feet ached.

My cure was lots of foot massages which often led to more strenuous activities. She smirked at me in the mirror as if knowing exactly where my mind had gone. “Sorry Mr. I’m laid up in bed with the stomach flu, but there will be no naughty things taking place until you’ve not puked or had a fever for a day.

“Now I’ve left the medicine on the night stand, and I’ve set the alarm for later when you and Bree need to take another dose. Remembers her are the chewy kind because she hates the taste of the liquid. If you don’t want her vomiting,” she wrinkled her cute, little nose at the thought. She’d
done enough of it in the last few months. “Then I suggest you remember the correct one. She’s asleep, but will more than likely be starving when she wakes. I made soup last night and stored a vat full in the fridge.”

Yesterday was her only day off for the week and she spent it with a mask over her face as she took care of us. I grabbed Brianna two days ago from school when the nurse called to inform me she couldn’t reach anyone else on her contact list, and if I was able to pick her up as she had a fever. Within minutes of arriving home as I carried her to bed, she puked down my backside then promptly cried.

Isla so far showed none of the same signs. I woke up yesterday feeling achy and shivering despite the fact the house was kept a little toastier than usual. Claire made her way over to me and brushed some hair back. “I would kiss you, but I don’t want your germs. I love you. Call if you need anything, or you can call my mother. She’s home today.” Her lips were feather soft against my forehead.

Her knuckles brushed against my cheek, a tiny whisper, and then she was gone. I rolled over and inhaled the soft scent of her shampoo on her pillow. The entire room smelled like her, which in a way helped me to feel her presence. On nights when she was on call and unable to leave the hospital, I laid in bed with the ache of her presence weighing on my heart, yet it wasn’t as bad as all of the nights when we weren’t together at all. I felt her all around me in the little touches in her room, the way her smell lingered on everything.

My eyes were heavy with sleep and soon I was in the land of my dreams again. It wasn’t until an elbow dug into me that I was awoken. Two, huge blue eyes stared back at me drowsily.

I pushed back a sweaty strand of her fiery hair. Her face was flushed with fever. “Oh baby,” my voice soft as she slid under the comforter and cuddled into my side.

She radiated heat, which wasn’t ideal given my own state, but I couldn’t send her away after all the past times she was sick and I missed it. “Daddy,” she croaked painfully. Her eyes wet with her tears.

I gathered her in my arms and held her close. I reached over to the nightstand for her medicine and handed it to her. It was basically lunch time, and I knew she shouldn’t really have medicine on an empty stomach. “Mommy made some soup for you. Do you want some?” Her head rolled in a way I interpreted as a yes.

Her sickness took a toll on her usual easy going personality. The life was sucked out of her, and she was a bit pliable. She agreed to anything suggested and spent the day mostly sleeping or watching cartoons. “Do ye want to stay here or come with me to the kitchen?”

I didn’t mind either way, but I’m sure at the moment she had a preference. “Stay here,” she cried as her eyes fluttered shut.

It was going to be a nightmare to wake her up to eat. She was only sometimes hungry since this whole sickness started. She threw up more than she ate, and it was a struggle keeping her hydrated as she wanted to sleep the entire time.

When I came back fifteen minutes later, she was curled into a ball with her hair plastered to her sticky face. I set the tray on the nightstand and sat by her to gently wake her. “Bree, ye have to get up. Ye’ve got eat some food.” Her grumbles were indistinguishable. Her mouth moved, but her eyes remained closed. “Come on, just eat a wee bit and then ye can go back to sleep.”

Her complaints were head, but she did as I asked. She eyed me skeptically as she took the first bite.
before her face smoothed into one of assurance. Apparently she didn’t trust my abilities to heat soup. “Mommy made it,” she said. I was a little offended, but Claire’s skills in the kitchen were quite good.

It was one of the things I was getting accustomed to since my return as she wasn’t the best cook in the world. We relied on take out and some basic kitchen skills to get us by, but neither of us were by any means relaxed in a kitchen setting.”

My head pounded against my skull as I slurped a spoonful of soup. The headache was always there when I was awake, which was why I enjoyed the blissful hours where my mind thought of nothing.

We both ate as much as we could without our stomachs churning too much. It was good, but neither of our appetites were there to fully savor the taste. Soon enough, I took another dose of medicine. Bree fell asleep with her head on my chest, and I followed her unable to ward off the effects of the medication any longer.

Time blurred as one hour faded into another and darkness settled upon the house. Shadows scaled the walls in their familiarity.

My eyes shot open as my dream suddenly ended. Bree’s soft breaths warmed my chest, and I realized drool pooled on my t-shirt. She took to sleeping with her mouth open because she was so congested.

I stilled at the thud of footsteps trailing up the stairs. Claire was on call tonight, and Isla was to remain at Julia’s to prevent her from catching anything from either of us. The creaking of the stairs filled me with dread, but I was too drained and had Bree on top of me to be able to do anything. There was a pause on the landing before whoever it was decided to head towards the master.

The door scraped against the carpet, each fiber practically catching on the door as it slowly opened. My eyes squinted as light filtered in from the hallway and settled upon Isla’s figure in the doorway.

Her hair was a mass of frizz, untamable and wild, not the sort of look she generally chose. Then I noticed how sluggish she was as trudged her way into the room, flicking off the light outside. The door closed with a soft click, but she still moaned at the sound. “Daddy,” she whimpered, the nasally tone obvious as she crawled into bed.

“So ye’re sick too. It’s becoming a family affair.” She slid herself in on my other side and laid her head on my bicep. “When did ye start feeling terrible?”

“Last night when I went to grandma’s,” she admitted. “I thought it wasn’t so bad, but then towards the end of school I rushed to the bathroom to throw up. I felt kind of better after so I thought it was fine. I’d taken some medicine before going to school. I threw up on the bus to the game. Coach was really mad about it and called mom who called grandma who picked me up luckily it isn’t an away game like tomorrows is, not that I can go. Coach made it clear if I want to even have a chance of playing in our last two games next week, I better stay home and get better.”

She sighed, clearly put out with her coach’s decision.

“I kissed her warm head. “Ye need yer rest. Ye cannae possibly expect to get well if ye dinnae tell yer mam or I what is wrong.”

It was the slight movement of her head that informed me of her rolling her eyes. I was able to ignore it as she it had lost its’ effectiveness the last two months. It was a frequent action of hers.
Just as I nearly slipped back into the throes of my dreams, Isla rushed out of bed to the bathroom. The sound of her retching was enough to get me out of bed and rubbing her back as she sobbed.

Bree shuffled around and called out from the other room. “It’s alright Bree. Yer sister has just caught our bug.” I heard the rustling of the sheets as she came to investigate and check on her sister.

Her slightly smaller frame knelt next to us as she patted her sister’s head almost a little too firmly and then briefly left before returning with a glass of water for her sister. “Sorry I got you sick,” she apologized, contrition written all over her face.

I wanted to inform her this wasn’t something one generally apologized for as disease was unpredictable. Victims were randomly chosen, and she had no way of knowing her sister would get caught in her radius.

Isla shrugged tiredly, with a soft smile for her sister to let her know it was fine. We ambled our way back to bed as I poured out the correct dosage for Isla, handed a chewy to her sister, and then took another dose myself. None of us were in the mood for any type of food, perhaps when we weren’t so tired. I clicked on the television Claire brought into the room, only because we were sick.

I flipped through the channels. “Stop,” Isla said as I attempted to bypass *The Princess Bride*. I loathed the movie, but Claire had a fondness for it, although I thought it was the hero she secretly lusted after in her youth. “I love this movie.”

I groaned un-amused. Claire would introduce this to our young and impressionable daughters. “Me too,” Bree declared. “I love Westley,” her voice took on a dreamy quality as she settled in comfortably beside me. “It’s so sad when Buttercup thinks he’s dead and almost marries the dumb Prince.”

“He’s a jerk,” Isla agreed. “I’m glad it all works out for them. Westley comes back to life because he loves her so much.”

It was simply inconceivable my two, well somewhat sensible daughters loved the movie. They quoted all of the lines, especially Montoya’s classic line about avenging his father. I wondered how many afternoons and evenings were spent with their mother just like this. It wasn’t a bad movie, but it was far too kitschy in my opinion.

I saw the hearts in their eyes as Westley yelled out “as you wish” and Buttercup tumbles down after him.

Claire said she started watching it when was four and sick. It was in the VCR, and she at least knew how to work it. Her mother had left it inside and before she knew it, her daughter was invested in the movie. By the time Julia reappeared with Tom attached on her hip, it was too late. She tried to take out the tape, but the precocious toddler screeched at her mother she was trying to ruin the best part. From then on whenever Claire wasn’t feeling well, *The Princess Bride* made more than one appearance depending on the length of her sickness.

By the time the movie ended, both girls were wide awake and gushing about one day falling in love. I dreaded the day any boy (that’s what they were) thought they could take my daughter on a date. It was terrifying as I realized in four years Isla would be the ideal dating age.

“Dad?” I shook my head to clear my thoughts and focused on the voice of my eldest. Her face showed she was peeved, and it wasn’t the first time she tried to call my name.
I wrapped an arm around her. “Aye lass?”

“Tell us a story about your first date with mom. Mom never shared those types of stories with us, and you always told us about your adventures as a kid.”

She was right. I purposely omitted anything past age sixteen as they primarily included Claire, and I wasn’t in a state of mind to indulge in the sad tinted memories of our past. Even in the present, those memories were still surrounded by a tinge of melancholy as our story was interrupted. In the time between there were others and we found our own forms of happiness.

My brain seemed to hone in on our time apart these last several days because despite my less than well status currently, it sometimes felt as if I were living a waking dream. It was almost too good to be true. It was as if any minute I would wake up in my bed in Scotland, and Claire would still be over three thousand miles away.

The girls looked at me expectantly with a start it occurred I was supposed to be sharing the riveting story of my first date with Claire. “Let me start from the beginning. I was on the train back to school from Lallybroch. I was living in London with an uncle. There were other seats available, but I spotted this girl whilst we waited for the train on the platform. She was reading some book. She hadn’t noticed me because she was really into it.”

She was beautiful with ivory skin and dark curls falling loose from her ponytail. I couldn’t make out the color of her eyes from the distance, but I thoughts perhaps they might be dark. It would compliment her.

I watched as she turned each page eagerly as she devoured the text. The rest of the world vanished for her as she kept her face in the book. It made me want to know her. I wanted to know what she thought of the book, if she enjoyed reading, and recommend some of my favorites for her. Maybe they could be future gifts if we got to know each other and became friends.

The impending arrival of the train was announced and the girl disappeared from my sight as she gathered her belongings. It worried me because there were stops on the way to London, and it might not be her final destination. As soon as I boarded I went in search of the mysterious dark haired girl because some part of me felt it would be a mistake not see her. There was something inside almost warning that if I didn’t talk to her, chances were we wouldn’t get another chance.

She was a passing stranger like Walt Whitman once wrote about. I wanted to know everything about her and I knew nothing then. In all of my years no one captivated me the way she did. Lasses in my village attempted multiple times to interest me, but I’d grown with them and knew none of them were right for me, not until an aingealstepped into my path. She was the missing light to brighten the darkness, which was fitting when I discovered her name.

“Oh dad,” Isla swooned, her eyes soft. “You’re such a sap. I think you’re waxing poetic.”

Bree swatted her sister for interrupting. “Na uh, I think daddy is being romantic. It’s so adorable he loves mommy that much. It was love at first sight.” She informed her sister with a superior tone, implying she was dumb for thinking otherwise. ”I think it's sweet he liked her more than other girl.”

“Alright lasses, while ye may nae think it’s true, I really did think that about her. My soul
recognized hers as my other half.” I wanted to convey to them the importance of that initial
meeting with their mother. Every good and bad thing to happen to me since that moment was a
result of our meeting, and I wouldn't change a single thing if it still led to now.

Isla chortled, grasping her sides as laughter overwhelmed her. "Dad that sounds more like a
fairytale or something in a romance novel than real life."

It realized my daughter was a cynic. "One day, ye're going to find someone, and ye won't be able
to explain it. Something will change for ye. Ye're still young yet."

There she sat, her head leaned against the window as she waited for the train to finally depart. She
appeared as if she were resting with her eyes once again unavailable for my viewing. Her
fingers were crossed in her lap, and I wondered not for the last time what was happening inside
that head of hers.

I calmly approached, although on the inside my nerves were all over the place. I had never shown
any interest in a girl, and I attended an all boys school. I rarely interacted with girls outside of my
sister. My palms sweated and I did my best to wipe them on my jeans to cover up my
apprehension.

She was young. I figured she was around my age. “Do ye mind if I sit here?” My voice sounded
controlled even though it was anything but. I was seconds away from squeaking, especially if she
told me no.

Her eyes flashed open to reveal golden orbs that travelled to the depths of my soul. There was a
wariness and a spark of irritation in her eyes, but she kept her face impassive until a slight divot
appeared in her brow. “Uh sure...” her hands gestured to the seat across from her.

She quickly readjusted her position. I felt bad for forcing her to change her position to something
less comfortable. We sat there for a few minutes, the silence almost overwhelming as neither of us
knew what to say.

Voices of the other passengers filtered into my consciousness, but I blocked them out as my gaze
kept returning to the girl across from me. It was borderline ridiculous and I finally introduced
myself after noticing her stealing glances at me. “I'm Jamie,” I offered shyly, my bravado
suddenly failing me.

“Dad, you're usually so cool. How could mom make you nervous?” I ruffled her dark red hair.

It comforted me to know she had yet to feel this way about anyone. “Ye’ll understand when ye’re
older.” She didn’t appreciate my answer, but allowed me to continue my story.

“My name is Claire,” her eyes lighting up as her lips curled into a smile. She held our her small,
smooth hand for me to shake.

I was a bit amused by the formalities as it was rare to find someone around our age actually
engaging in a handshake. I appeased her by taking her proffered hand. The moment our hands
connected, I knew she was it for me. I thought I was just looking at stars before, but it was like
fireworks exploding behind my eyelids. That was just a touch. I wondered what would happen if
we kissed. Her lips looked so soft and I wondered if they felt soft.
Both girls pulled away with disgusted looks on their faces. “Ew daddy, that’s nasty. It’s cute you guys kiss, but we don’t want to actually here or see it.” Isla’s head bobbed across from her sisters in complete agreement.

I kept our hands together for as long as was socially acceptable, but I had to pull away. Coldness settled over me and I was lonely again. The fireworks were gone, and the stars barely twinkled in the night sky.

It was then I realized her accent indicated she was a Sassenach and not a Scot. I thought it might’ve been one of the many London accents I heard regularly. There were enough of them. “Are ye from England?” I asked her.

“Yes, I was born and raised in London. Where are you from?” I loved the sound of her accent already, how she glided over syllables.

She leaned forward, which seemed to be an unconscious action for her. I saw as her face reddened, and I thought she didn’t seem like the type to easily get embarrassed. I marveled at her now rosy complexion and realized our meeting was having an effect on her as well.

“I’m just from outside of Inverness. I was home visiting family. I actually attend school in London.” It occurred to me I had a chance with her. We were in the same city, and while there several other million people in the city limits, it was fate that brought us both on this train where we could finally meet.

It turned out we were both sixteen. She was a bit older than me, but I always fancied an older woman for myself. We talked the entire ride back to the city. The hours faded as time ceased to exist for us. It sped up as the conductor announced the next station, and Claire noticed it was hers. I was suddenly nervous about what she thought and if she wanted to continue our contact or attribute the train ride as kindness from a stranger. Then she did the unthinkable and gave me her number, and invited me to ring her some time.

I thanked her on the outside as I jumped for joy on the inside. It was incredible a sophisticated and poised girl like her would find me remotely interesting. I essentially lived on a farm while she was a city girl. The moment she stood, the train jerked, knocking her off balance and into my lap.

“It was the first time I called her Sassenach,” I glossed over the other bits. “She sniffed me too and then quickly rushed off the train as the door opened. I called her later that day, and we actually stayed friends for a while until we snogged or made out as ye Americans say.”

“Okay but you still haven’t told us about your first date.”

I seriously blundered on that one. “It isnae romantic, and I was positive yer mam was never going to want to date me after that disaster. It was truly one of the worst dates first or otherwise.”

October 2000
I spent two months working up the nerve to finally ask her on a date. It baffled me how she could remain single, especially as I saw how other guys’ eyes lingered on her, or flirted with her when we went out. She thought I was being daft and ignored it, but I knew they saw the beauty in her as I did. She was attractive and smart, probably one of the smartest people I knew. She could outwit nearly everyone.

Our date took place the same day we first kissed. I was shocked when she said yes. I don’t know what exactly I was expecting. It just seemed so impossible she returned my feelings. Her mother’s arrival home actually provided me the time to gather wool and collect myself.

I planned a date I hoped she found romantic. I tried not to spend too much money as any spare pound went into my savings for university. Our family estate brought in a modest income back then and my da had more to worry about than how he was going to pay for university. I wanted it to be special though because I was already aware of this innate desire to spend the rest of my life with her and to impress her. That desire made me out to be a fool more than once. Sometimes it seemed as if we’d spent multiple lifetimes together, and then other times it was like no time would ever be enough. I learned things about her all the time including her love of theater. She preferred plays over musicals and was very much into the classics.

I did some research and discovered the Globe Theater had a production of A Winter’s Tale running. I made a reservation at the restaurant at the theater. The seats weren’t the best, but it was what I could afford.

In total, I had around eighty pounds for the date. I recently purchased my ticket home, which cost me a bit and I was still searching for an afterschool job. If I had to pinch a few pences, it would be fine as long as I could treat her. I had to pay for the cab ride there and back and dinner. I was hoping it would be enough. I wanted to lessen the time we had to walk anywhere as it was cooler outside as we neared November. Claire was just sick two weeks ago and if I could make it easier on her, I would.

I arrived back at her apartment dressed in nicer pants a button up shirt with a tie. I had on a jacket as well. The door opened to reveal the most beautiful specimen on the planet. There were truly no words to describe her. She was radiant with lightly applied make-up and her curls pinned back, showcasing her face. She wore a simple black dress that hugged the curves of her body with a simple black heel. A string of pearls adorned her neck, and I pictured my mother’s pearls sitting there one day. She wore a matching pair of earrings as she slid on her coat.

I saw her mother hovering in the background with a gentle smile. At least she approved of our decision to progress our relationship. I was mortified when she entered earlier that I stuttered something or another before making haste and getting out as fast as I could to prevent further embarrassment.

The cab waited below for us and I held out my arm for her, which she took with a satisfied grin. “Jamie, where are you taking me?” She begged to know, but I refused to divulge my secrets. I had to use every advantage I had. This was my chance or I would be stuck as her friend permanently. I needed to make a perfect impression.

Isla snorted as Bree exclaimed loudly, “DADDY! You always say there’s no such thing as perfection.” She wasn’t wrong. I set myself up for failure on our date by trying to attain something that doesn’t exist. It was one of the reasons I tried to instill in my daughters the importance of giving their best effort instead of reaching for a goal they could never achieve. I would rather see them trying to get better than to believe they’d attained perfection.
“Aye, I learned from my experience trying to make it perfect for yer mother how bad it can get. It doesnae feel so good when ye feel like ye've failed.”

“I don’t see how it could go poorly dad. You took mom to the theater, the weather doesn’t seem too bad, and while you aren’t rich, it isn’t like you didn’t have any money.”

“Just ye wait, I havenae gotten to the worst of it.” She looked doubtful about my assertion.

I paid the cab driver when we arrived. It was a sizeable amount, and I cringed when I realized I might have to dip into my savings with my bank card. “You know you don’t have to pay for everything,” she told me.

Claire and I usually split things or switched off paying for stuff whenever we hung out, but this was a date. I was the one who asked her on a date. It was my duty. “Dinnae worry about it, Sorcha.”

Her eyes met mine and I saw the burning confusion in her golden eyes. I saw a lot of things in them. “It’s yer name in Gaelic. It means light, and I think ye’re my light.”

Both of my daughter groaned in embarrassment as they began to giggle uncontrollably. “Dad,” they cried out at the same time.

“Do ye want me to finish the story?”

I already used a fair bit of my cash for the cab, and realized I would need to use my bank card for the meal if I wanted to pay for the return ride home. We arrived early for the pre-dinner at the Swan Restaurant. I wanted the three course with the starter, main course, and dessert. She deserved a proper date.

I wanted to bash my head into a wall when I saw the prices on the menu. I plastered on my biggest smile so she wouldn’t know I was panicking internally. It wasn’t that I didn’t have money. I spent every summer holiday since the age of twelve working for our neighbors and my da. I did everything I could to earn money; I just rarely spent it.

“So why today?”

I blinked at her, unsure of her meaning. “Let me clarify, why did you choose today to finally ask me out?”

It dawned on me she was unaware of how long I harbored feelings for her. I grasped her hand in mine and the fireworks exploded on the inside of my eyelids. It was as if I were walking in a world of grey and she brought color to everything. “Claire, since I’ve met ye I’ve been working on a way to ask ye on a date. I was nervous, ye ken? Ye’re this amazing person with all of these interests and I’m me.”

She frowned in apparent displeasure. “Jamie, I happen to like who you are.” Her eyes looked down to where our hands were clasped on the table. “I’ve waited practically every day since we met for you to ask me on a date. I hoped you returned my feelings, but as time passed I began to wonder...” her voice drifted off sadly.

I could’ve kicked myself for not realizing she waited for me to be ready the same way I waited for some kind of signal from her to inform me she liked me as well. A bit cowardly but I didn’t know
how to capture her attention, and I was still learning how to read her. Her facial expressions belied the words she said, and I often thought about what went on inside of her brain and the words she held back out of fear of rejection.

“Ach, Claire,” I was truly speechless. She stole the words from me. Of all the possibilities I considered prior to today, I estimated I had a less than fifty percent chance of success. Recently, she began to talk about a classmate of hers from school, and the way she spoke of him, I had to wonder. Was he brave enough to admit his feelings for the lovely Claire? I knew she wasn’t some sort of consolation prize. I never thought of her in that way. She just had so many options. “I am mucking this up, aren’t I?”

Her eyes flashed with confusion at my question. “Jamie, you aren’t. Truly I love this. I love theater and really any time spent with you. Even a walk along the Thames would’ve been perfectly fine. I love our time together.” She was so heartfelt and I wanted to feel deserving of it so much.

The first course arrived. We both went with the terrine. Neither of us spoke much, and our eyes briefly met when we tried to peek at each other through the thick of our lashes.

I didn’t want to mess the date up more than I already had. By the time the second course arrived, I didn’t know how to talk to her. It was different when we played the game of friends, but truth be told she was never just a friend to me. I coveted her heart the entire time.

“All right your dad lost…”

When it came time to pay, it turned out I’d lost my wallet somewhere between the cab and the walk to the theater. I began to panic internally because I couldn’t fathom how I would pay for the meal. It was nearly sixty pounds and that was without the gratuity added.

A stroke nearly came over me when Claire slid her wallet out of her purse and placed her own card inside. My face flamed because this certainly wasn’t how I planned the night to go.

CPOV

An uncomfortable stretch of silence settled over us, and I couldn’t figure out the latest cause.
Jamie was stiff and formal after I covered the expenses of the meal. His hand was like lead on my back as he escorted me into the theater. I didn’t honestly care about the seats as with any play, it was the live experience that truly mattered. To feel the emotions pouring out of the actors and to sit in an atmosphere reminiscent of one hundreds of years prior was a thrill. I was delighted he wanted to go to the theater.

I hadn’t thought he was a theater type. He read the classics, but that wasn’t a confirmation of anything.

During the performance, he clenched his hands on his lap, and I thought I ruined it. He didn’t want to hold my hand and wanted the date over as soon as possible. He refused to even look at me. His face had a stony expression. “I have to use the restroom. I’ll be back,” I informed him at intermission. I bit back the tears forming in my eyes.

I rushed to the ladies room to have a nice cry in one of the stalls. It was a pity session.

“Daddy made you cry?” Bree was aghast as she stared at her father in disbelief. “You always say to treat mommy nice and not make her cry, although she cries all the time now.”

A watery chuckle crossed my lips. That was my Brianna, always saying whatever popped into her little head. “Well lass, I dinnae ken she was crying.” It was true. I touched up my make-up and splashed some water to hide my tears.

By the end of the play, my hands nearly lost all of the blood circulating as I had them clasped so tightly together in my lap. I hadn’t paid any attention to the last half of the play as I seethed. It was his entire idea to go on the day, and then he gets all shirty for no reason. No one forced him to ask me out. He had free will. I just wanted to go home and forget it ever happened. I wanted to forget stupid boys named James Alexander Malcolm Fraser even existed.

We walked over to the Southwark Bridge to find a black cab so I could finally get away from him. He clearly didn’t want to be around me, and that was fine with me. I thought we were moving towards something. Apparently it was all in my head, and he didn’t deserve my tears if he was going to behave this way.

We hardly had no wait at all for a cab as we’d been amongst the first out of the theater. I needed air and space from him, especially if I had chance of recovering from my feelings for him. For the time being, I would have to lock them away. Maybe we could get to the point where we would be friends again, which would hurt immensely. I saw how girls stared and flirted with him regularly whenever we were out together. He didn’t realize, but his natural charisma drew them in and he inadvertently flirted back with them. I wasn’t much to look at beside them.

All three of them stared at me with open mouths. The resemblance between them was very much present in the moment. “Mom,” Isla sputtered as Jamie said my name.

“Ye cannae honestly believe that. If anything, it is them that dinnae hold a candle to ye. Ye’ve always been extraordinarily stunning.” He would’ve added some other things if not for the presence of our impressionable daughters in the room.
“Yes mommy, you’re the most beautiful mommy on the planet.”

Tears fell from my eyes at my family. They were so sweet. “This was years ago.” Although the reproachful look I received from Jamie let me know the discussion wasn’t over, and we would definitely revisit the conversation when we were alone.

“Anyways...” I continued, bringing their attention back to the story. It had been so long since I thought of that particular day. I held the memories so close to my heart. I usually stopped them after my mom caught us on the couch because everything else hurt far too much.

I slid immediately to the opposite end, and made it clear with my body language I wanted my space. My face was turned towards the window as I tried to hide my dismay and my tears at my failure. I supposed it wasn’t meant to be. That thought wounded me the most, and my heart clenched almost painfully as the first tear spilled over. I hastily wiped it away as to not let him know what he’d done to me. He shouldn’t have to feel guilt it was such a disaster and I was a terrible date.

Relief washed over me as the cab pulled in front of my flat. The city blurred past, and I hadn’t realized I recognized most of the streets for the last ten minutes. I quickly exited the cab and ignored Jamie’s pleas until I heard him tell the driver to wait a few minutes as he chased after me. I wasn’t quick enough to escape him and he cornered me.

“Ah Dhia!,” his voice a mournful cry when he saw my blotchy complexion and red eyes. “Sorcha,” my eyes fluttered shut at his honeyed tone. His hands framed my face as he gently tipped my head back. “Open yer eyes, please,” he said.

His eyes shown brightly and swirled with a brilliance of blue and grey hues. What struck me was the love I saw in them directed at me. I gasped as he lowered his head to mine and tentatively brushed his lips against mine before pressing harder. His mouth urgent and insistent as he traced my lips with his tongue.

My mouth welcomed his and my arms wrapped around his neck. I pressed my body to the length of his and felt him respond. It did wonders for my ego.

We pulled back slightly out of breath, but our bodies were still touching as we realized our time was soon ending. His thumbs gingerly caressed the sides of my face as he stared at me. “Ye dinnae do anything wrong,” he told me. He shushed me when I opened my mouth to immediately protest his assertion. “It was embarrassing for me. I’ve never wanted to impress someone as much as ye in my life. Losing my wallet and having ye pay for the meal was humiliating.”

I found his statement vaguely sexist and told him so. “Sassenach, it matters not to me if ye pay in the future, but I was the asker. I invited ye on a date and then I couldnae even pay the meal. At least I already had the tickets.” It occurred to me he planned for so long to make the night special.

It wasn’t exactly the magical night I imagined, but somehow all these misunderstandings fit us. It made for a memorable night. “I just wanted to make it special for ye. I really lo-like ye Claire.” I was shocked because he was going to say love. He loved me. I rejoiced. Even though he couldn’t say the words yet, he felt them. It meant more to me than any silly date.

I stood on my toes and kissed him hard. My fingers tangled in his hair, and it was like I was in my own personal heaven. “I’ve got to go,” he sounded like he was in agony at the thought of leaving
own personal heaven. “I've got to go,” he sounded like he was in agony at the thought of leaving me. I related because I felt the same.

“I ken,” he pulled back with a cheeky grin at my use of a word from one of his many tongues and swooped down to capture my lips yet again. The first drop fell and then more joined it, but I didn't care as long as he never stopped kissing me.

His lips were soft and fitted against mine perfectly. We were both greedy for more, but he had to go home and couldn’t keep the meter running forever. Also if we stayed in the rain for too long, we both would be sick. “Do you need money for the taxi?” I asked him as it suddenly occurred to me he lost his wallet.

He shook his head. “My uncle will cover it when I get home. Goodnight Claire,” he kissed my forehead and his lips lingered longer than necessary. I knew why he hadn’t kissed my lips and smirked at him. I watched as he left and stayed outside until I could no longer see the cab anymore. I was drenched, not that I particularly noticed or cared. All that mattered was Jamie and I were together, and he loved me. I sort of fell against the door in complete and utter amazement at what transpired between us. It was the greatest day of my life. We managed to salvage what was admittedly not the best date, and the day was once again at the top of list of my favorites. Even with the cold I caught from the rain and cold.

It was as if a spell were cast on me as I floated up to my apartment and past my brother and mother. I laid (after taking a shower and burying myself in warm pajamas) in bed touching my lips, feeling the phantom tingle of his lips, and dreamt about the day where curfews and cabs wouldn’t matter anymore.

“Oh dad, who knew you were such a romantic?” Isla’s eyes were clouded over with the thought of love. “How am I ever going to find a guy to measure to those impossible standards?”

From his expression I read the smugness. He found her statement a positive one. “You definitely want to find one like your dad. He doesn’t have to be perfect, but he certainly should make you feel like he is, flaws and all.” I told her. “By the way, how did you start telling them this story?” As far as I knew, neither of us shared stories of the past with them, at least none that didn’t directly relate to them.

“Well ye’ve managed to sway them into loving The Princess Bride, and I had to sit through it again with another generation.” He winked at me with his famous cheeky grin. “They asked and I cannae refuse them anything. I told them about the day we first met because it was an important one and it led to all the best things in my life.”

I couldn’t have said it better if I tried. “I’ll have you know that it’s one of the best films ever and is regarded as a classic.”

He held a mischievous glint in his eyes. “It’s certainly a classic, a classic in bad story telling.” Both girls gasped offensively. “DADDY!” I laughed because they were on my side and it was three against one.

“Alright, well I think it’s time for all of you to get some rest. I want to check your temperatures and then give you all another dose of medicine.”

They grumbled a bit, but complied with my wishes. Jamie and Bree’s fevers were down from this morning, Isla spiked one. She was a bit higher than them, but I knew she’d be fine. When we got a little more medicine and some fluids in her, she would recover. It never hurt anyone to take a
few days at home to rest. They all dutifully took their medicine. I kissed the girls and brushed my lips briefly to Jamie’s. “I love you all.” I never thought taking care of my family could be such a meaningful experience, but my heart was so full.

My hands dropped down to my stomach and I stroked the bump. I already started to feel some of the fluttery movements, and nearly wept the first time I did. Our child was in there, safe, warm, and protected. “Looks like it’s just you and me, daddy and your sisters are all feeling yucky. How about some ice cream?”

Chapter End Notes

Hello lovely readers, I know it's been two weeks. I just got stuck on this chapter and then halfway through it clicked then turned into a monster of a chapter. I'm honestly looking at around 50 or so chapters. I never imagined it would be so long. Thanks for all of your encouragement, and honestly I don't mind when you guys ask questions or ask about the next update. You're the best.
Sorry this is a bit short guys. I really struggled writing this one. It's taken me like two weeks. Thanks to everyone who kept me on task. I've gotten really into one of the epilogues as of late, and that's where my focus has been.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CPOV

I was a bundle of nerves nearly all morning, setting everyone who encountered me on edge with my anxious energy. I shot them apologetic glances during surgery, rounds, and even in the cafeteria with Joe. It was hard to settle as I had a scan later today that would reveal the gender of our child and show us how our child was developing so far. Joe merely shook his head at me, slid his fruit cup in front of me, and smiled as I stuffed my face unable to control the cravings.

The baby was a fan of fruit, which was the opposite of my last three. They were junk food addicts. With Isla, I craved fried foods, but tried to balance it with lots of veggies as a result. Bree loved sweets from cakes to cookies. Gabriel… well he had a hankering for fast food.

“Lady Jane, you need to relax,” his smile tender and his eyes crinkled in that Joe way of his.

He somehow possessed the ability to keep my calm and distracted me from all of my worries. “I’m just anxious,” I admitted to him. “I don’t know what I’ll do if there’s something wrong with my baby.” Tears clouded my vision. It seemed I would never escape the urge to cry.

His hand covered mine as he gently squeezed. “Have you ever heard the expression don’t go borrowing trouble?” I blushed because he knew I used it regularly on the girls. “Until your doctor gives you actual reason to worry, then don’t. Now why don’t we talk about that amazing family of yours. We haven’t had you over in ages.”

Gail doted on the girls and loved them to bits and pieces. Lenny was in high school and according to his father, heavily involved with politics. Their daughter Sarah was two years younger than Bree, and absolutely looked up to my youngest. Normally, we saw them at regular intervals, but the upheaval of the last several months sort of discontinued that tradition at least temporarily.

I told him about the weekend, which was hard as Jamie and the girls were still recovering from their bout with the flu so I sent my mother over there to watch over them as I was on call Saturday night. That particular night was stressful as there was a fire in a nearby apartment building, flooding the hospital with patients, and creating a chaotic atmosphere in which we’d lost three patients. My residents were particularly upset when one of them coded on the table under their instruments, but I was trying to instill in them the importance of taking responsibility and accepting the capricious nature of our chosen profession.

I stood proudly as they informed the next of kin of the patient’s passing. It was the hardest moment for any of us, but it was our decision to pick a career where the of our patients mortality was something we had to regularly consider. Ideally, we saved more than we lost, but it only made the ones we lost that much more meaningful.
In the past, I went home to a house where I kept away that darkness from my children, not that I wanted to shelter them from the realities of life, but I didn’t want to see the broken expressions on their faces when they realized I couldn’t save everyone. I had no one to release my emotions to because despite Peter having the same occupation, I could never let myself go there with him. A crack in the foundation led to the crumbling of a wall, and I wasn’t ready for that sort of intimacy with him.

It was the first night Jamie stayed over after we fully reunited and I returned home after a long day where I cried into his chest. My hormones had done a number on me, and it was harder to disassociate myself from the difficult cases.

“Jamie suffered through multiple viewings of The Princess Bride,” Joe swallowed his smirk as he was all too aware it was my favorite. “He loves them so much. It sometimes seems as if he was always there, and then other times…” It was all too apparent of what we robbed our children of in our haste to separate and sever all ties between us. We acted selfishly and as a result our children bore the consequences. “He seems lost sometimes, especially when the girls have afterschool activities. Bree’s football practices sometimes coincide with Isla’s games, or how she’s foregoing indoor football this winter to put more effort into snowboarding. She wants to compete,” I smiled wryly at him.

Joe chuckled softly to himself and shook his head. It didn’t surprise him in the least. Bree’s passions tended to result in drawing out her competitive nature and there was nothing she enjoyed more than winning.

I leaned back in my chair, my hands loosely cupped my water as we conversed. His voice was soothing and helped to center me.

“I don’t think you need to worry about him. Jamie likely feels divided between the girls because he can’t be in two places at once. I know he wants this more than anything in the entire world. I’ve seen the way he looks at you from the first time we met until now. The man can barely see straight if you’re around. I’ve actually seen him trip over a coffee table when he spotted you entering a room.”

I covered mouth to hold back my giggles. I remembered it was one of the first times Joe and I spent time together outside of school. He and Gail invited us for dinner, and I met Lenny for the first time. He couldn’t have been older than three at the time.

Gail and I were talking in the kitchen as I tried to offer my services in assisting with dinner. Jamie and Joe were talking in the family room as Gail finished putting the food in the oven. We’d barely walked into the room before Jamie’s literally tripping over the coffee table, leaving the rest of us laughing.

His cheeks flamed in complete embarrassment as he tried to cover his blunder. He never fully explained what happened, although now I had a good idea. “I never saw anyone who looked that in love in my entire life, and it was incredible how much he adored you, although it goes beyond that.”

I understood what he was saying. “I know. I feel the same. It took me a long time to finally admit he was the one all this time as cliché and trite as that sounds.” I fingered the rim, watching as rivulets of water traveled down the sides. “It was easier to convince myself I hated him instead of admitting I loved him. It hurt less.”

For so long, I carried the hurt on my shoulders and in my heart because forgiving him was as good as taking him back in my mind. I loved him and I punished him because I didn’t want to feel weak.
“Claire, one thing I’ve admired about you is your ability to push aside all of your issues and do your job. You don’t let anything preoccupy your mind and constantly pour yourself into the work. However, it’s left you a little fragile and cracks have appeared on the skin you show everyone. You tell yourself you’re one thing when really on the inside you’re a complete mess.” I wanted to disagree with him, but the problem was he hadn’t said anything as of yet that was incorrect about me. “The world won’t judge you for occasionally falling apart. I know you and Jamie are in therapy, so have you actually discussed it with him? Any of it?”

I winced. There was something only Joe knew. I hadn’t told Mel because she would press for details, which I didn’t really have. I used a complete stranger as a way to jump through the hurdle of moving on from Jamie, only I had a tragic meltdown, resulting in a brief psych stay. The guilt was overwhelming and burdensome, until I cracked from the weight of it all in front of several of my fellow residents after one of my first long term patients died.

It was a stressful time as I was about to start my third year of residency. It had been a couple of years since my divorce and everyone constantly pushed and nagged at me to move on and accept what we all knew as fact. I drove the love of my life to another continent, not that anyone but myself phrased it like that. They encouraged me to put myself out there again to try and find another.

Joe sighed. “I’m sorry it isn’t my place to lecture you. You’re doing your best and don’t need any added stress.”

I rested my head on the table and stared at him. There was never any sort of romantic attraction from the moment I met him. It reminded me from the beginning of the one I shared with my brother, and since then I’ve regarded him as another brother. He was an ear when I needed someone to simply listen as he never offered real advice. He thought it was subjective and absolute bullshit. He sort of helped lead to a solution to any problem.

“I sort of hate how well you know me.” He cracked a smile and rubbed my head with his calloused hands.

“Oh LJ, I will never judge you. You do what you do so you can get through it all somewhat whole. I can’t begrudge you that. Now we’ve been here for a while, and the residents under us have been roaming around the hospital.”

“Well mine should be overseeing my patients. Tomorrow I’m doing an LVAD, so they should be following pre-op procedures. Otherwise they’ll be on scut. I’ve also got one up in the ICU, they should be regularly monitoring.” I sighed and began to push myself out of the chair.

I glared at Joe as he tried to hide a smile. “Sorry, it’s just been so long since I’ve seen you like that. It’s kind of funny.” I poked my tongue out at him causing him to laugh.

People around the cafeteria stared at us, making him laugh even harder about the entire situation. I gathered my trash and left him choking on his own hair as he struggled to breathe. It served him right.

He should try being pregnant and getting massive to the point where by the end you can’t see your own feet, shave your legs or other areas, or walk normally. He caught up to me as I arrived at the elevator. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he apologized, although I heard the hint of a laugh in his voice. I rolled my eyes. “You know you’re much bigger this time around.”

My eyes narrowed dangerously and he took a step back. Luckily, we were the only two occupying the elevator, which was actually quite unusual. “It’s just in the past you were so tiny until the fifth month when you exploded.”
I worked my jaw, trying to keep my temper as he continued to make a dog’s breakfast of the situation. “Keeping digging your grave,” I warned him.

He shut up and stood quietly as we watched the numbers light up.

By the time half past two arrived, I was more than ready to leave the hospital for my appointment. I would be back later, but I had a few hours away where I would find out so much. We would also have the option for an amnio if we chose to do so. I was thirty-five now, and the risks were higher for any sort of chromosomal disorder.

I knew it was possible, but that plenty of women 35 and older had perfectly healthy children. I mentally debated the costs of the tests as I waited for Jamie to pick me up to drive me to my doctor’s office.

Jamie smiled at me as he slid out of the car to first peck my lips then guide me with a hand on the small of my back to the passenger side of the car. He opened the door and helped me in. Normally, I would’ve had an issue with him taking such liberties and probably would’ve called him a chauvinistic pig or something of that nature, but recently I found those tiny actions he did for me quite charming. It was his way of showing how much he cared. In the past, I let my irritation take over and snapped at him frequently about my independence.

I sighed because I wasn’t always fair to him. I glanced at him as we drove to my doctor’s office. He appeared absolutely delighted. It emitted off of him, creating such a radiant effect. It was as if he were glowing. It was adorable to see him so excited. I know for him it was to make up for his less than positive behavior the last time, but I also didn’t need him to make up for anything. His actions were exemplifying the amazing man I knew him to be even under times of duress.

We waited about twenty minutes in the waiting room before they call us back. I quickly changed and then assumed the position on the table. Jamie’s hand was instantly in mine, squeezing, and I sent him a tiny smile. We both lost so much in the past, but it was the time for us to put away all of our silly squabbles. Soon enough there would be another tiny being depending on us for everything. We had to have it together, and we were definitely getting there each day through work. Our counseling sessions were revealing and often left us both feeling completely raw as we examined our past relationship.

It was hard as we scrutinized every tiny detail that seemed of minute importance and discovered it helped contribute over time to a larger issue. Jamie’s inherent messiness was one of my bigger problems in our marriage. I had never noticed before as he seemed to pick up his belongings in a tiny manner, but as we got married and had kids, he left his dirty clothes all over our room. His dishes were never put in the washer. It made me resent him because it felt as if he were treating me as a maid instead of his wife and equal. I wasn’t a housewife either and expected the work to be split in half. We weren’t living in some 1960s sitcom.

Sarah entered the room with a ginormous smile. “Oh look at you mama, you’re definitely appearing quite full. You’ve got such a cute bump. When I was pregnant, I swelled everywhere. My hands were enormous. It was terrible. So we should be at the four month mark.” She set up the machine for when Dr. Roberts arrived. “I’m going to draw some blood and we will take some measurements to make sure everything is going well with the pregnancy.”

I winced at the pinch of the needle. Sarah rubbed my arm soothingly after finishing up with the blood and covered the puncture with a bandage. It wouldn’t bleed all to much anyways. She then weighed me. “Alright anything we should be worried about?”

“No, everything is actually going well. I’ve had a healthy appetite. I haven’t thrown up in a few
weeks. I’m not as tired anymore, which is a relief.” My only issue was with the vivid nightmares every night, but there wasn’t much anyone could do about that.

She nodded as she documented everything. “Alright Claire, Dr. Roberts is finishing up with a patient. She will be in a soon as that’s done. If there’s nothing else, I’ll see you at your next appointment.”

I turned to Jamie as soon as she left. “I’ve never admitted this to anyone before, but I hated coming here alone. With Gabriel, I was so isolated and lonely, and I watched all the other couples with their happy, expectant faces and felt a surge of jealousy. I remembered when we were them.” My vision blurred a bit, but I ignored it in favor of finishing my thoughts. If I didn’t say it, I never would. “I resented a lot of things if I’m going to be honest. It wasn’t just you. Trust me, when I tell you my first thought when I saw the pregnancy test wasn’t overwhelming joy. I went through a myriad of emotions, a lot of them quite negative. I suppose the tipping point was when you experienced the same thing. In the past, you indicated you wanted a houseful of children, and while it wasn’t an ideal time for us to have another baby, it never occurred to me you would be less than enthusiastic about it.”

He opened his mouth, but I slid my hand over it. “Let me finish,” I told him. I saw in his eyes he wanted to explain his own thought process. “I resented the baby for taking you away from me as selfish as it sounds. I was angry because this undoubtedly would affect medical school and my residency. We already had two small children, and I wasn’t entirely sure I could handle another one. I thought it- he would be a burden to my career aspirations.” I choked on a sob. “Sitting here with you, I realized how much we deprived ourselves the last pregnancy. It’s the little things that are making the real difference. You remember to bring me a glass of water every morning, you pack me lunch on occasion or bring me dinner because you know I’m not always paying attention to meals, or you hold me every night. While big gestures are nice, they don’t necessarily carry the same weight as the day to day things. I’m glad I’m here with you and no one else.”

His eyes were blue diamonds. I had never seen them sparkle so brightly. It could’ve been the unshed tears, but I knew what my words meant to him. “Thank you, I love ye Sorcha.”

I squeezed his hand. The door opened and Dr. Roberts entered with a smile on her face. I saw the nerves in the corners of her eyes though, and that it was more of a half one than anything. She was as anxious about my pregnancy as I was.

“Alright Claire, today we are going to do your sixteen week ultrasound. If the baby cooperates, we should be able to determine gender. This ultrasound will also help determine if we need to do anymore testing aside from blood screening. I know you were here a few weeks ago, but you know as well as I do how things can change.” During my appointment, there wasn't time for an ultrasound so we did more blood tests and measurements. I got paged to the hospital for an emergency with one of my patients.

Minutes later we were rewarded with the sound of our baby’s heartbeat. “Wait, what is that?” I knew what the sound of a perfectly functional beating heart sounded like. Something wasn’t right.

Dr. Roberts maneuvered the transducer. Her face was the picture of shock as she turned to look at me. “Claire…”

Chapter End Notes

Also for those who've asked my little kitty is doing fine. Although she still hates the
puppy we got two weeks ago. The feeling is mutual with the puppy as well. My new goal is to finish the story by the end of the year. I feel that’s less ambitious than my previous goals. This story has gotten a bit away from me but I suppose that’s what happens with muses.

I’ve made a poll. I want to give you guys the opportunity to decide something so please vote! Although it isn’t confirming anything either way. Part of me is still keeping my options open. This is sort of the one part of the story I haven’t made an official decision about.

https://linkto.run/p/CPH1FB7B
JPOV

We sat in the car for thirty minutes trying to process everything Dr. Roberts told us. When she delivered us the news, neither of us could believe it. It was simply impossible.

I finally started the car as Claire had to return to the hospital to finish out the rest of her shift. She hadn’t uttered a single word since the appointment, not that I was particularly in the talking mood either. The news certainly explained quite a few things, but it was still entirely unreal for us to comprehend.

I pulled into the car park and waited for her to respond to her surroundings. She was in a daze. “Claire,” her head turned slowly towards mine. It was sort of creepy seeing the emptiness in her stare. “We’re at the hospital mo ghràidh.” Without saying a single syllable, she opened the door and walked towards her work.

I was a bit worried about her after that bomb, but it just wasn’t anything we expected to happen.

I hour earlier

“Claire, that’s your son’s heartbeat, and that other sound is your son’s.”

I blinked once, twice, three times as I tried to process what she said. Did she just say what I think she did? There was no way I heard her correctly. “I’m sorry, but did ye say…”

“Yes, there’s two of them. They’re identical twins. It’s a monochorionic, which means they share the same chorion. This is your son,” she gestured to the screen. I could sort of make out the details of a head. I saw where the heart was, and nodded because he had a nice healthy rhythm.

Then she slid the transducer to the other side of Claire’s girth. “That is your other son, and he was more than likely hidden by his twin when you came in to your first ultrasound. It can sometimes be missed, and might not be seen until now.”

Claire’s mouth fell open as she stared at the monitor. “That’s impossible.” Her eyes were wide and searching as if trying to determine if someone was playing some sort of prank on her. “You would’ve seen it the last time.”
“Claire,” she admonished softly. “As you’ve probably done an obstetrics rotation, you know as well as I do that twin aren’t always visible in the beginning. Have you noticed more weight gain this time?”

I pressed my lips into a tight line because if I answered I was sure to be on the couch later tonight. The fact was in the last few weeks, she had gained a fair bit more weight than in her earlier pregnancies. I attributed it to each one being different and her age this time, but twins certainly explained that away.

I did have a question. I wasn’t familiar with all of the medical terminology like the good doctor and my… Claire. “Uh what is a chorion? What does all of this mean exactly?”

They both turned to stare at me if realizing for the first time I occupied the same space as them. Dr. Roberts cheeks colored with slight embarrassment at realizing she’d primarily addressed Claire. “Sorry about that Jamie, it means your sons share the same placenta. It happens in about seventy percent of pregnancies with twins. Now this does mean her pregnancy is more high risk than before, and she might end up on bed rest for sure at the end. There are a lot of problems with twins. Luckily they aren’t sharing the same amniotic sac, however, we will be carefully monitoring her more closely. It means more appointments.” I glanced at Claire who sat in stony silence. “It also means more precautions because of your previous history and age.”

She gave us some pamphlets about pregnancies with twins and multiples. We also scheduled our next appointment in two weeks. Dr. Roberts was deadly serious when she told us at our very first one how she wanted to see the pregnancy all the way through without any harm to the babies or Claire.

My phone dinged with a text. I raked a hand through my hair. It was from Claire.

**We will talk later. I need time to process. –Love C**

I sighed because later meant tomorrow. Claire wouldn’t be home until late tonight. By then the girls and I were already in bed, and she could continue to avoid the discussion we both knew was necessary for our preparation of the future.

We already had to clean out her office to make space for the baby or babies as I was coming to think of the pregnancy. It would be a fairly huge adjustment for the both of us and the girls. It wasn’t adding another baby but two more.

Isla and Bree were still coming to terms with my presence in their lives. Some mornings as we sat for breakfast, they stared at me as if I were a figment of their imaginations. They usually preferred to make inquiries to their mother and then their grandmother, forgetting I was available to them. I was overlooked constantly by them, while it stung when they went to their mother, I understood. Claire had a regular presence in their lives and was the one who made the tough decisions.

It was somewhat isolating watching the three of them interact as they spoke rapidly in some sort of shorthand that made sense to them, or perhaps I was projecting. My ineptitude to fully integrate myself into their lives was wearing on me. It was as if I was on double duty constantly and making all sorts of missteps.

The house was silent and still as I entered, but I could hear the echoes of my children’s laughter and squeals as they enjoyed the pleasures of childhood.

A sighed escaped me as I headed toward the makeshift office space in the family room. We moved her desk downstairs along with the desktop and printer. I was working from home for the
remainder of the day. I was a financial analyst/business owner as I still owned my business back in Edinburgh. I traveled back one weekend every month to oversee everything. Sales were at an all time high for the brewery and the pub was doing quite alright as well.

My position with the company was more for a legitimate reason to move stateside and provide an easier way to attain residency. The company took care of all of my visa issues, which was a relief in itself. I also enjoyed the work. It was the one thing I missed when I moved away, but I needed to do something else when I was back home.

I was working on a new project for a client we recently attained. It was a group effort and I was assigned my tasks.

My head pounded slightly as the computer took its’ time booting up and the printer appeared offline.

I began to rummage through drawers in search of paper and pencils as some of the work would need to be done by hand if I couldn’t get the computer working.

In the second drawer, my hand hovered over several envelopes addressed to me in Claire’s loopy handwriting. I could never figure out how she had such perfect, delicate writing with its’ flawless swirls and curls. My cursive was atrocious and I primarily stuck to print. I joked with her in the past about needing to work on her penmanship as doctor’s were supposed to have terrible, unreadable handwriting.

She rolled her eyes and summarily dismissed me.

Normally, I didn’t pry as I didn’t want any accusations of snooping hurled in my direction. Jenny, certainly got on my case enough when we were children for constantly involving myself in her business and spying on her. She was none too happy to discover I had listened at her door on more than one occasion. I still occasionally felt the phantom pains of my father’s hand on my hide when the urge to meddle overcame me.

Regardless, I decided to proceed even though it was an invasion of her privacy.

October 24, 2012

Dearest Jamie,

I’m not sure I should address it like that, but my therapist encouraged me to write to you. She said it would help me say the things I wanted to without fear of actually hurting or scaring you.

It’s strange how long we’ve been apart. Some mornings I wake up and expect you to still be there and for a few moments, I’ve completely forgotten. I was accustomed to your propinquity and never considered for a single second one day where we would reside on two different continents with an ocean separating us. I’ve always been in such close proximity whether it was thirty minutes by the tube, or an hour cab ride, or you simply sleeping by my side.

Perhaps, I fibbed a bit, a few lines previous. There was one time where I considered the possibility, we couldn’t reconcile our differences. Sometimes we have a propensity to disregard our past history; however, there was the year we were broken up. I’ve never asked you about how the experience was for you out of genuine fear that it was illuminating for you.

I was aware you dropped out of school for a term and then took summer courses to catch up so that you could finish school on time.

Every day we were apart, I agonized over whether or not to contact you. It was a lonely
experience. I declined every offer for a date because it would’ve been real. It was ages before I agreed to go out with my friends. They pleaded with me for months to snap out of it and stop moping around our flat.

They finally resorted to calling my mum when I refused to do anything aside from my coursework. I threw myself into my studies because I thought they were all I had. I wrote in my journal and did school work. I rarely left my room. It scared my flat mates, and my mother threatened to withdraw me from school if I didn’t pull myself together. I was mucking up my life over a boy.

I screamed at her that I was alone. I’ve never told you this and you’ve never particularly asked, but the reason my mother looks so young is because she is. She’s seventeen years older than me. My dad was a bit older than her when they got involved, and my grandparents weren’t exactly pleased by the situation. By twenty-two she was a widow with two children.

She told me when my dad died, she felt alone despite having Tom and I as the reminders of her love with him. She couldn’t help but envy every happy couple on the street. In all the time I had known her, she hadn’t dated anyone despite being absolutely beautiful and one of the best women I knew. She said she made a conscious choice to be lonely. Loneliness is a choice not a result of something.

I was choosing to live my life alone instead of actually living it. My mother told me when I left for university and Tom decided to complete his last year of study in France with relatives, she realized she needed something else in life. By all accounts, she was in her thirties, practically the prime of her life.

She had a boyfriend. My mother chose not to be lonely because when looking back on life, you don’t want to think about all the opportunities you missed.

While my heart yearned for your company, I had to put myself first. If fate wanted us to be together again, well someway we would find ourselves together again. It’s a misconception I believe to think just because you’re brought together, means you’ll always stay together.

Presently, I made a choice not to be alone. I’m not entirely sure I’m ready to full throw myself into the venture of dating, but I’m open to the possibilities. I’m allowing myself not to be lonely and giving my heart permission to let you go.

Pieces will always belong to you, do not misunderstand me, but I don’t want to spend the rest of my life alone.

I don’t intend for you to ever read this, so it makes me feel better writing it.

-Claire

I blinked as I finished the letter. My thoughts moved far too quick for me to catch one as I absorbed the meaning of her words. It was clear Claire struggled to move on from our marriage, despite the passage of two years.

Most people thought we were together consecutively from the age of sixteen to twenty-four. It was actually false. We spent nearly a year apart, and I took off an entire school term as it messed me up mentally and emotionally to the point I was unable to concentrate on my school work.

I went home to Lallybroch to figure out myself and to regroup in preparation for returning in the spring and completing coursework during the summer.

We fought and yelled horrible things to each other prior to the termination of our relationship. I could hardly believe some of the words I hurled at her.
“You’re unfeeling and heartless, and I don’t think you know how to love.” I smirked at the satisfaction it brought me to see her face crumble, then my heart clenched painfully as I realized what I said to her. “No, I dinnae mean that.”

She wiped at her teary eyes. “Are you sure? It sounds like you’ve been holding that one in for a while.” Her tone was devoid of any sort of emotion. Her normally glass face, stony.

I threw my arms up angrily because she was doing it again. She acted as if my words didn’t bother her when they clearly did. “Do ye nae care that I told ye, you dinnae feel anything? Ye never tell me what is going on inside of that wee brain of yers, and I’m left feeling as if I’m more invested in this relationship than you.”

She was stricken and reacted as if I’d slapped her. “What do you want from me? I’m trying to give you as much as I can.”

I scoffed and laughed callously at her words. “Ye wouldn’t ken how to do that if you tried.” Her cheeks colored as a mixture of embarrassment and anger settled inside of her. “While I believe ye love me, ye only love me as much as you let yerself. Ye cannae fully let go, which has left me feeling as if I’ve never really had you. Ye’ve always had every part of me.”

Her eyes lowered and I felt something shoot up my spine. I was suddenly uncomfortable and felt slightly anxious as if something bad was about to happen. When she lifted those dark orbs, I saw something in them. There was resolution and an emptiness I’d never known. It was as if the spark inside her died and she was merely a walking vegetable. “I’ll make it easy for you then. You want someone you can have, well you no longer have me at all.” She turned and without thinking my arm shot out and grabbed ahold of hers.

When she swiveled around, I expected a raging inferno to confront me. Instead there was barely a flicker from a match. She carefully removed herself from my person. “Please Claire, I dinnae want this to end. We can work on this.” I needed her like the air I breathe, while I wouldn’t say she completed me, she certainly filled in the empty spaces of my life. Where once darkness reigned, she brought the light of the stars with her.

A choking sound, I realized was a cold laugh emanated from her. “Don’t you know by now Jamie, I’m not capable of real emotions. I can’t fix what doesn’t exist.” I watched her walk out of my flat without turning back. The door closed with a soft click instead of a gentle thud, as she quietly disappeared.

I lost interest in my school work and my advisor recommended I take time away from my studies. If I removed myself from the school and took a term off, it wouldn’t affect my overall grades as opposed to the impossible recovery of my grades by the middle of term.

It was months before the flash of brown curls didn’t cripple me with unbearable sorrow. My melancholic nature drove Jenny insane and she flew to London to yell some sense into me.

“Jamie, I ken how much she means to ye, but if ye dinnae put yerself first, who will? I cannae always be there to protect you from the world. Claire has her own things to work out. There’s no sense in brooding around yer flat, hoping for her to waltz back into yer life.” She cupped my face and forced me to look at her. “Da, wanted nothing more than ye to get an education and be happy.”

I glanced away shamed by her words. She knew what it would do to me and struck a chord. My
father lived his life with as little regret as possible. He said regret was a useless emotion because you’ve already made your choices. There was no such thing as a right or bad choice because whatever choice you made was the right one in that moment. There’s no pre-existing guide for living your life, and you have to navigate with the tools you already have. Happiness wasn’t about your choices.

The only person who can make you unhappy is yourself if you continue to beat yourself up for all of the perceived bad choices you believe ruined your life. Our choices were what defined and brought us closer to discovering ourselves as we learned more about the essence of who we are at the core with each challenge. My da told us he never regretted a single day with our mother and never dwelled on the fact she died.

He still had us and we brought him happiness because we brought her/them happiness.

“I dinnae like admitting this, but ye’re right Jenny. Da would be ashamed of me if he saw me wallowing.”

She ruffled my hair with a small smile. “Ye cannae let someone else’s choices define your own. I ken you love her with your whole heart, but Jamie I think ye always kent there were something between you.” I opened my mouth to retort angrily and defend my ex-girlfriend from my sister. “There’s no need to look like that. It’s not like I’ll start a stramash. I love her too. I talked to her after ye told me, and I understand her side of things.”

“So ye’re siding with her?” I crossed my arms.

She flicked me in the head, her dark eyes piercing my own. “No, ye idiot, I am always on yer side. I think ye were both young for such a serious relationship seeing as ye’ve carried it over from when ye were both children. Sixteen is a child. Right now, the important thing is to get yerself ready for the next term so ye dinnae fail out. I want ye to continue working and figuring out who you are. For a longtime, you and Claire were a pair, and now it’s just you.”

I was slightly embarrassed at having jumped down her throat. “I’m sorry. I’ll figure it all out Jenny.”

Jenny kissed my head. “I ken. I’m always a phone call away. I know I’ve got the children, but that doesnae mean I can’t help you.”

There was a stack of more letters. I knew I shouldn’t after already reading one, but I was genuinely curious about what she had to say. It was the things I tried to get her to talk about in our sessions, but she was more than a little tightlipped.

March 2013

My dearest heart,

I’m not sure I should continue to call you that, but in my heart it sometimes feels as if you’re mine. That seems selfish given I practically sent you packing. I don’t think I could ever forgive myself.

I can’t hold onto my regrets any longer. My therapist thinks it’s too unhealthy for me.

Today Isla came home from school with the saddest face, and she wouldn’t tell me for two hours what bothered her. It was until I tucked her into bed that she revealed the daddy/daughter dance happening at her school, and how there was no point in her attending as her daddy was in Scotland.

I asked if she wanted to call you to invite you. Perhaps, you would’ve had some free time to make
it for a dance. She said no. It was stupid and that you shouldn’t have to fly out for something as silly as a school dance. She then turned over and pointedly ignored me as she tried to go to sleep. It struck me then what we’ve done to them by our failure to compromise. Our current arrangement hurts both of them.

Bree gets confused sometimes when you talk on the phone or on the computer. It’s gotten better as she’s aged, but it particularly confused her after her first visit to you.

I wish we’d been better. We’ve hurt them because we couldn’t love each other enough to get through the tough times.

Love with all my heart,

Claire

There were so many of them and they weren’t all in order either.

July 2014

Jamie,

I swallowed harshly because I understood the direction of this letter before reading the words adorning the page. I didn’t need to read the strokes of her pen to know she met Peter or how exciting it was for her to find someone after such a time.

With each passing month as my therapist told me, I find the pain lessens. I wake up each day and continue with my routine and I find the weight of it all isn’t as much. In the beginning, particularly before therapy, I felt the burden of our relationship and the death of our son.

I hurt so much because I wanted to feel nothing. I wanted numbness so I didn’t have pain. Nothing was better than something. Then I really did feel nothing and I wanted something again.

Two years ago, I spent a week at a psychiatric treatment center. I was so messed up and non-responsive after I lost a long term patient. I freaked out in front of half my class and had a huge meltdown. Joe drove me to the center after we both agreed it might be beneficial for me. It was. It truly was.

I finally had someone to talk to about all of my issues. I went on anti-depressants for quite some time, and when the medication began to work, I felt less burdened. I was more in control of my pain as I began to meet with Dr. Meadows.

We identified several reasons for my breakdown. The loss of my patient was the catalyst, but there were so many things I hadn’t dealt with and buried under the proverbial rug over the years because I didn’t want to feel.

I thought I deserved to live with the pain. It became such a regular part of my identity, I often forgot it was there weighing me down.

We talked about the impact of my father’s death and being raised by a young single mother. We spoke at length about my relationship with you. She helped me identify several moments in our relationship where I withheld emotional intimacy and only provided the physical element because it was easier. I could give you my body without giving you everything else. I’m sorry about that. I figured it was better to hurt me than you. My one night stand with a virtual strange was another encumbrance. I used someone to try and get over you and it made me feel worse when I discovered I was the same for him as well.
Gabriel was one of the bigger topics in our sessions aside from you. It was months before I opened up about that pregnancy. I wish I could say I was excited when I found out, but I was disappointed because surely it meant an end to all of my opportunities. There was no way we could’ve managed three kids with our marriage hanging on by fraying threads and me about to finish medical school and start my residency the following year.

We were already drowning and barely keeping our heads above water, and a third child would’ve sunk us. Isn’t that horrible? It was my first thought when I saw the pregnancy test. I wish it weren’t my initial reaction.

I waited to tell you. I needed time to figure out how to explain how it happened. We were so careful and yet not careful enough, and it was so soon after Bree. I spent most of the night after you left crying. It wasn’t primarily because of your reaction but my own coupled with it. Every child should be wanted. Our faith talks about what a blessing all children are and we should welcome as many into our marriage as possible.

When we lost him, the guilt crippled me. It was remorse at its’ worst. I thought at least he would never have to feel unwanted, but then wondered if that wasn’t the reason God called him so soon?

It took me a long time to grapple with his loss and come to terms. Visiting him brings a sense of peace to me and I hope one day you have the privilege to meet your son. Maybe he won’t be your only son, and maybe he won’t stay my only one as we move forward with our lives.

I’m finally at a place in my life where I can see the possibilities. Peter is a work colleague and he’s been the light when I thought I could never flick the switch again.

While it isn’t the same sort of initial feelings as I had for you, I can see the relationship going somewhere. He makes me laugh with his corny American jokes and he never pushes for more than I can give him.

I hope you’re finding your own happiness as well. There’s nothing I want more for you.

-Your friend, Claire

At the bottom of the drawer was a leather bound journal. I drew the line there because some boundaries one never crosses. It was different reading your sister’s diary compared to your girlfriend/mother of your children or whatever we were defining our relationship as. It was confusing most of the time as neither of us was ready to plunge back into marriage. I wasn’t sure we wanted to get remarried.

I scrubbed my face with a frustrated sigh hanging on my lips. “You know if you wanted, you could’ve just asked.”

I spun around in my chair and she was there in her pregnant glory. She had the glow about her as her hair hung in chocolate colored waves. It had darkened after the passage of summer and into the transition of autumn.

“I was intending on eventually giving them to you.” I quirked a brow at her. “Okay so it’s more of a recent development,” she conceded. “Still I thought since I wrote them even if it was for my own benefit, I thought you should have the chance to read them. I don’t want you to take anything personally.”

I opened my arms for her and she came quickly, burrowing her head under my chin, soaking in the warmth and comfort I offered. It was one of the things that still held true about her.
I stroked her hair as her breath came out in little puffs against the skin of my neck. “Can I ask you something?”

She pulled back with a wary look. “I suppose.”

“Why didn’t you call and tell me about yer time in the facility?”

She bit her lip as her eyes shifted quickly, almost imperceptibly if I hadn’t been watching for it. “The truth is that I felt ashamed. I wasn’t coping well at all. All my previous methods were failing me, and I didn’t know how to react. Self-preservation took over at some point, especially in those last few months of our marriage. I figured since the girls weren’t here, it didn’t seem like something you needed to be made aware of.”

I sighed because I think she forgot that I promised to always be her friend. “Claire, when I said I would always be there for ye I meant it. It wasn’t some empty promise I made out of obligation. If anything, aside from co-parents, I hoped we could maintain some semblance of a friendship.”

She leaned her head back onto my shoulder as she fingered the hem of my shirt. “I didn’t want you to view me as weak. I was a mess and it was truly one of my own making. I needed time to heal. With you having the girls, I was able to focus on myself for a few weeks instead of using the girls as distractions from my problems.”

I pushed her head back down when she seemed ready to gear up towards defending herself. “Shh… mo ghràidh, it doesnae matter anymore. Let’s talk about the babies,” she stiffened in my arms, which reminded me she wasn’t supposed to be home in the first place.

“All of my surgeries have been postponed or reassigned. I had to inform the chief about my status and well given my past history, he agrees with my doctor about my abilities. He doesn’t think it’s a good idea in my state to be standing such long hours on my feet. I’ll still supervise my residents and oversee my patients, but it certainly doesn’t hold the same thrill as cutting.”

I shivered at the glee in her voice. I wasn’t exactly a fan of blood, needles, or anything involving scalpels. She said I was a baby. “So have ye had time to think?”

“Yes,” I felt her words against my skin. I couldn’t make out her tone, but she didn’t sound particularly pleased. “Don’t misunderstand me, I’m glad to have an explanation for the extra poundage, but two babies was unexpected. In this particular case since they’re identical, it isn’t really the fault of genes. My egg just split and that’s that.”

“So what’s the issue?” I knew her well enough after almost twenty years to detect when something wasn’t quite right with her. There was something she was holding back.

“How am I supposed to take care of two babies? How can I go back to work?”

It was starting to make sense to me. Claire wasn’t the type who could easily focus on multiple things at a time. She liked to place her attention at one area of her life at a time, otherwise she overwhelmed herself to the point where she had stress headaches.

I kissed her head and held her tighter. “Well, we can hire someone when you go back to work. Also, I’m sure yer mother would be willing to help. She helped raise the girls and they’ve turned out well and so will their little brothers. I’m a bit incredulous myself at the prospect of two babies, sons.” I felt her smile at my words.

I loved my daughters. However, it would be nice to have someone carry on the family name. My girls would inevitably marry some day and well on my father’s side, I was the only one who could carry on the name. “Ye’re an amazing mother, and ye really dinnae need to hear that from me.
The girls tell ye all the time.” I was envious, but she worked hard to cultivate her relationship with the girls.

She sacrificed to be there for them whenever they needed her because that was the sort of person she was. “What else is bothering ye?”

She covered her face with her hands and muttered something, mortification coloring her tone.

“I’m sorry but I didn’t catch that.”

Claire removed her hands and glared at me with those liquid pools of gold. “I don’t know anything about boys.” Her voice was small and her cheeks a bonny pink color.

“And ye think I kent about lasses?” I was terrified by the prospect of having daughters. As I stared down at their tiny faces, I realized there were so many things that would happen to them as they aged for which I had no understanding at all.

It was by far easier in the days when they desired tea parties and played house. They dressed up in my ties and dress shirts. Those days were long gone, and it was hard sometimes to remember they actually happened when I spent time with the girls. They were far removed from the silly little lassies who wanted to hear fairy stories before they went to bed.

Her head rested on my shoulder again. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. It’s just going to be quite a change. I had time to adjust to having two children, but I will from two to four.”

“We, we will go from two to four. You’re not in this alone anymore. I’ll be here every step of the way.”

“I know,” she sighed. “Sometimes I can scarcely believe your presence. I feel better knowing I’m not by myself. The girls were much harder when Bree started walking and talking. They had their own secret language, and their favorite game was hide and seek.”

“I ken. They did it at my house as well. I thought it was some way to make me go mad as I searched the entire house for them. It was their giggles that clued me in eventually. They seemed to understand each other quite well.” It made me feel good to know they behaved the same way with their mother.

“They were little devils for a while. I think it helped when Isla started school and couldn’t spend all of her time with her sister anymore, although the worst of their fighting began then as well. She came home from kindergarten and announced she didn’t play with babies any longer.”

I could only imagine how well that went over with Bree. Her wee tantrums were nightmares as her face turned red and she threw herself onto the ground, screaming for all she was worth. Sometimes she even held her breath as a form of protest. It terrified the living daylights out of me the first time she did it. “There will be two new terrors to add, but I’m not worried about our ability to handle them. You’ve done two by yerself, so I think ye can handle another two. The girls can help out as well. It’ll be a good deterrent.”

She not so gently nudged me in the ribs. “I hate to break it to you my love, but our girls will eventually grow up and have relationships with boys. You never had any experience dealing with fathers so it’ll be your first time in this sort of dynamic.”

“Are ye sure we cannae send them off to a convent and they can pledge themselves to be virtuous nuns?”

For the first time in I don’t know the years, I heard Claire’s true laugh. It was her carefree, I don’t
care who hears, sounds like bells, maybe there was a snort laugh. It was a rare treat and I laughed along with her, living in the moment. “Sorry, but I don’t think that’ll work. It’s not going to be awful.”

“I dinnae ken if I can handle two toddlers and my daughters dating.”

She patted my chest sympathetically. If anyone understood my position it was her. We were starting over when we were halfway to the finish line. “It doesn’t happen all at once so take some solace in knowing you’ve got about two more years. Besides I’ve already told her she can’t date until she’s sixteen. She’s far too impulsive and righteous at the moment, and needs to do some growing up before dating anyone.”

Yes, it was something I’d learned about Isla, the more time I spent with her. She felt quite justified in all of her actions, and always felt she was right when we warned her against doing something.

“Mostly I’m worried something will go wrong. My last three pregnancies resulted in some interesting birth scenarios, and I’m terrified about giving birth to two children instead of one. Most of Jenny’s pregnancies were easy including the twins. There was the stillbirth, but it’s not the same as she’s not my age with my history giving birth to children.”

There wasn’t much I could say to reassure her as she made valid points. She was a doctor and knew about a lot of what could go wrong. “I’ll be there with you every step of the way. I want ye to know that.”

“I do Jamie, I know that.” Her phone began to ring and she groaned as she shifted on my lap to reach for it in her pocket. She glanced at the caller ID before pushing herself off with a bit of assistance from me. “Bonjour, çava?”

I cocked my head. I had never actually heard her speak French. I knew she had relatives still over there as her father was first generation. Her grandparents moved back to France after he died, and still resided there as far as I knew. I think they were near Nice or somewhere else along the coast. England was too cold for them, and they wanted to be back with their kinfolk.

“Aucune grand-mère, je vais bien. C’est des jumeaux.” Her French was flawless and probably better than my own. Something niggled at me as I heard her converse with what was apparently her grandmother. “Le médecin est d’être prudent. Je dois travailler moins.” It was superb and as if it came effortlessly to her. She told her grandmother about the twins and her doctor’s request that she work less.

Her grandmother was obviously busy talking as she bobbed her head and said oui. “Ce sont deux garçons. Oui Jamie est le père.” She rolled her eyes as she blushed a bit at whatever her grandmother said.

I had only met Élisabeth a few times. I knew Claire’s middle name was after both her grandmothers, but primarily her French one as she was the most supportive of her parents’ relationship. Her grandfather Maurice never seemed to like me much and glared at me whenever his granddaughter wasn’t around. His face was one of contempt at our wedding, but he still walked his granddaughter down the aisle.

“Nous visiterons lorsque les bébés sont plus âgés. Les filles sont très bien. Isla est aussi intelligent que jamais et Bree est excitée pour son dixième anniversaire.” They were talking about Bree’s tenth birthday now. “Belle, elle allez l’adorer.”

They talked for a few more minutes before her grandmother had to settle in for the night. “How is it I’ve never actually heard you speak French before?”
Her eyes were wide and inquisitive. “Well I’m not sure what you mean. I’ve said things in French in front of you.”

“Yes,” I said exasperated. “But you’ve never held a full fledge conversation. You always spoke to your grandparents in English. I assumed it was because you weren’t fluent.”

There was such surprise on her face before she began to chortle. “Jamie, I’ve been speaking French about as long as I’ve spoken English. Hell, there are home videos where my parents tried to convince me to speak English because my nursery teachers couldn’t understand me. It took until I went to reception for me to finally transition to speaking English more than French.”

I stared at her dubiously. “It still doesn’t explain why you’re only now talking to your grandparents in French.”

Her eyes rolled, which was a frequent habit of hers. She had to look no further than herself to explain why Isla thought it was perfectly okay to roll her own. Haughtily, she placed a hand on her hip. “If you must know, you didn’t tell me in the beginning you spoke French. When I first introduced you, it seemed respectful to do all the conversing in English and it sort of became the standard. Since they’ve moved back to France, they don’t have as much use for English. It’s easier to hold conversation in their regular every day language.”

“Ye ken Isla is taking French? Isn’t that considered cheating?”

She shook her head. “Isla can speak it, but she has no idea how to write it or some of the other grammatical rules. I’m sorry if you thought I misled you or something. I honestly thought you were aware. I’ve got to go call my mother and tell her about the appointment. Do you mind if we order out for dinner?”

I didn’t, but she was already out of the room before I could say anything. Her energy was definitely back in this second trimester. She slept frequently during the first twelve weeks.

Still there was something that bothered me about the fact she spoke fluent French and I had no idea after all these years.

The computer was up and I quickly logged on and began my work on the project. I needed the distraction it provided because I couldn’t stop thinking.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys for your endless patience. I went back to the second epilogue and I finished it. Weird because I haven’t even started on the first one, but I was so inspired writing the second one. Oh well! I’m finally going to be as it is 4:30 and I’ve now got a headache, but this chapter has finally quieted.
Some angst, but I promise there isn’t too much of it left in the story. Also we’ve now hit the 200,000 word mark which it seems like just yesterday I hit the 100,000 mark.

CPOV

I didn’t understand the sudden moodiness and sullenness from Jamie, and found myself quite peeved with him as he hardly interacted with us during dinner. He spoke only when directly addressed; the girls merely shrugged and conversed with each other as I stabbed a piece of my broccoli.

My eyes were raging infernos as I stared him down from across the table. The coward wouldn’t glance at me though as he pointedly continued to ignore me.

His behavior stung as I wasn’t sure what I did to cause such treatment. I know he read a few of my letters, but I couldn’t recall if there was anything terribly revealing inside of them.

I realized belatedly the girls were talking about their Halloween costumes for Wednesday. This time of year constantly snuck up on me, and it occurred to me I had yet to begin any sort of shopping for Christmas. With the babies and everything else, I didn’t want the girls to feel as if they weren’t important.

I never went overboard for Christmas, only because my grandparents did that for me and my mother. My parents were both only children, therefore Tom and I were their only grandchildren, making their great-grandchildren all the more special.

“I’m going to be Cheryl Blossom,” I overheard Isla telling her sister. “I’ve already got my black heeled boots, the red leather jacket, a black crop top, and a mini skirt. Oh and let’s not forget the choker.”

My brow crinkled as I recalled when all of these things were purchased. I had no idea it was her intention to go as a character a few years older than herself. “Exactly how short is this skirt?”

Her blue eyes rolled in my direction. “It’s the length of all my other skirts.”

“What about the crop top?”

I saw the irritation on her face from my persistence in asking questions. “Geez mom, it isn’t even that big of a deal. You barely see any of my stomach since I’m so short. Calm down,” she said.

“Why are you going trick-or-treating in high heeled boots?”

There was genuine surprise on her face as she scoffed at me. “Uh mom, I thought pregnancy brain was a myth. I asked two weeks ago if I could attend my friend’s Halloween party. I’m too old for trick-or-treating.” A scowl formed on her sister’s face as the comment was directed at her and
obvious some tension existed between the two because of this point of contention.

“I did?” I forgot all sorts of things these days with my mind stretched in a million different directions. “I don’t recall. Whose party is it?”

She barely resisted rolling her eyes when I directed a carefully constructed glare. She must’ve felt the iciness because I was tired of her recent attitude. Twelve wasn’t a good number on her, and I was growing tired of her newfound behavior. I thought I had to worry when she became a teenager; however, with each passing day, she was displaying more of that teen brattiness and independence.

“First off, if you don’t knock off your attitude and change your tone, there won’t be a party for you. You can stay home and wish you had the privilege to even trick-or-treat.” I saw a scowl on her face, but chose to ignore it. “Secondly, I need to know all of the details of this party as it is a school night and you’re twelve years old. You are not eighteen and even when you are, don’t think you’re too old for me to take over my knee. Do you understand?” She mumbled something under breath. “That wasn’t clear for me. I need you to verbalize it louder.”

“Yes ma’am,” her eyes burned with a blue intensity. “My big sister Meggie invited me to her party. You’ve known her for like a year mom.” I heard the pleading tone she used just before whatever she wanted turned into a whine.

“Will her parents be there?” Meggie was a freshman.

Isla was treading a fine line. I saw her eyes twitch slightly at the question; luckily she seemed to refrain from her favorite action to convey her feelings as of late. “Yes, you can even call Mr. and Mrs. Müller if you like.” Bree sat with rapt attention at our back and forth, while Jamie offered no support. He was seemingly lost in the sea in his head.

I sighed, knowing if I didn’t let her attend, I would never hear the end of it. I preferred a less hostile version of my child. “Fine, but I will contact her parents tomorrow to confirm their presence at the party.” Isla didn’t protest, which meant she was telling the truth or whatever version of the truth she knew. “How are your piano lessons?”

“Boring, I could outplay my teacher any day.”

“Well I hope you haven’t phrased it like that to him. Everyone always has something to learn. What sorts of pieces are you currently working on?”

She was silent for a minute. “My teacher says I’m better than him so I don’t see what’s wrong with me saying it. Anyways to answer your question mother, Schumann’s Toccata in C Major, which is extremely challenging because of the quick pace in about seven minutes. Right now I’m having difficulty getting the timing just right.” I was glad she found something to stimulate her as she worked her way through more advanced compositions. “Two weeks ago, he introduced me to Balakirev who has this phenomenal piece called Islamey. It’s usually an encore piece so I might save that for my next recital. Lastly, I’m working on Ravel’s Gaspard de la Nuit as a competition piece. I’ve also been practicing Moonlight Sonata and Clair de Lune for fun.”

“Do I really have to play an instrument next year?” Bree interjected.

Isla passably glanced at her sister. “Bree,” she said in her loftiest voice. “It’s a requirement as is participating in choir. I had to learn how to play a second instrument because of the same requirement.”

Jamie furrowed his brow. “Ye play more than one instrument?”
All three of us stared at him as it was his first time actually participating in the dinner conversation of the night. He was silent over there as he concentrated on whatever occupied his thoughts.

My twelve year old wrinkled her nose. “I can play a bit of cello and some violin, but I prefer the piano. Ugh, and I’m so glad to be done with choir. Can you believe my teacher wanted me to audition for Cantilare?” It was the school’s select choir ensemble. “I don’t understand because I never really showed much an interest. I participated.”

She was right. On her report cards, her choir teacher expressed how she wished Isla would apply herself as she saw how much talent she had. “Although I would take that over having to dance any day.”

Bree snorted, which turned into a full cackle as she remembered what happened during a school performance. If there was anything Isla was truly terrible at, it was her ability to dance. It amazed me how she could keep rhythm and on beat when she played the piano and sang, but as soon as she tried to apply that to dancing, all the rules went out the door.

“Oh and mommy has it on camera, it’s a classic.” Isla glowered at her sister who stuck her tongue out in return. “When you tripped coming off the stage to go down the aisle and then fell into Kelly was a moment I’ll never forget.” This brought forth more laughter as her older sister sat back and crossed her arms.

Jamie stared between all of us as if we lost our faculties. I sensed he felt out of place on more than one occasion, but I didn’t know how to fix it. I couldn’t give him back all that time and the memories, even though I desperately wished I could. We watched a lot of our home videos, but it still wasn’t the same as being there in person to witness it happening.

“The day after Halloween is our first holy day of the school year so that means mass.”

“Yes, it is All Saint’s Day,” Jamie confirmed. “Does yer school always hold a mass?”

She nodded as she took a bite of her dinner. “Yes, we have mass on all of the holy days and special feasts. It depends because sometimes it’s not at the school chapel.”

“Do ye do vespers?”

She shook her head this time. “Only during advent,” she informed him.

Faith was important to both of us, especially when Isla was born. Sitting in that chapel together had been one of the most spiritual moments of my life as I prayed with my husband for the life of my daughter. I sometimes still marveled at how she turned into such a strong, often cheeky young girl. Her insolence often bordered the line of my patience with her.

“What about you?” He directed at our youngest child for now.

“Oh we have mass too. I mean we don’t have weekly chapel like Isla, but we have religion as a subject. We talk a lot about our relationship with Jesus, but we are moving onto another unit.”

Jamie hummed and nodded as he listened to Bree prattle on about religion.

“So I was thinking about trying out for ice hockey…” My head snapped in the direction of my eldest child as I stared out her, trying to figure out if I heard her right.

Jamie blinked a curious amount of times as his mouth gaped open like a fish. “Ye want to play what lass?”
She ducked her head nervously with all of our attention on her. “I want to play ice hockey or at least try out.”

“Can ye give us some time to think about it? I ken ye play field, but it’s a wee bit different on ice.” I was glad he had taken that one instead of me. I rubbed my stomach wondering what sorts of terror inducing stunts the two boys inside of me would be apart of one day.

I already had Bree who was ready to jump right into snowboarding. Now Isla’s trying to raise my blood pressure by playing ice hockey.

“Mom, I checked the calendar in the kitchen, and this weekend is the mother/daughter mass and brunch at school.” I fixed her with a look. “Okay, they also gave us the reminder in homeroom.” She admitted as she and I were both aware she rarely checked the school calendar.

It occurred to me we were so focused on Isla, I hadn’t considered her younger sister. “Bree, lovey what is your costume this year?” My mother usually took care of this part as work was demanding and I rarely finished early enough to take them shopping.

Bree perked almost immediately. “I’m going as Dorothy.” She sounded so proud of her choice. “We got blue ribbons for my hair though since I’m a redhead. Nana even let me get red, sparkly shoes with a little heel.” I loved the exuberance she displayed with things most people would consider small stuff. “She said we can braid my hair exactly like Judy’s too.”

“From The Wizard of Oz?” Jamie asked. He never saw the movie. However, they annually aired it on CBS and my mother introduced them to the glories of it. Isla read the book and Bree finished it over the summer.

“Yes dad, I don’t know any other Dorothy’s.” It was odd hearing a simple dad fall from Bree’s lips, but there was also a hint of disrespect.

Jamie seemed to have heard it as well for he frowned. “I would kindly ask ye to speak to me with a more respectful tone.”

I didn’t think I could handle the two of them both being teenagers one day. Bree had her days where she could just as surly as her sister. Isla’s monthly was a complete nightmare as she became more emotional than she already was as a twelve year old girl.

The girls were silent as they finished their meals. The only sounds that were heard were the scraping of our forks on our plates and our glasses when we set them on the table. I swear I heard my heartbeat in those tense minutes as we all finished.

Before I could say anything, the girls rushed out of their chairs to clean their dishes. Then they disappeared upstairs without uttering a single word.

I lifted my head from my plate to see Jamie staring out into space again. “That’s it. You’ve been in a pissy mood since our conversation earlier. What is your fucking problem?” I couldn’t control my temper any longer.

His detached behavior at dinner was another instance of him withdrawing. “I dinnae ken what ye mean.”

“Oh bullshit you don’t. What the bloody hell is your deal all of a sudden? Is this seriously about me speaking French? I never concealed it from you. You never asked and it never seemed to come up in conversation.”

His eyes erupted into blue flames and I found myself silenced by the look. “No,” he roared angrily
as he stood up quickly, knocking over the chair. “It’s about you hiding parts of yourself. Every
time I think I’ve figured you out, I discover there’s more to unwrap. We’ve never talked about
your mother’s age, and today I discover you were a teen pregnancy. What other little secrets have
you hid from me? You went to a fucking psychiatric facility because you had a breakdown. Yet, I
the father of your children had no idea how you were suffering. You didn’t think that perhaps I
cared about you still and that it could possibly affect our children.”

“I-I-well-“

“You think you have to do everything by yerself because that’s the way ye’ve always done it. The
truth is ye’re being selfish. Ye find it so much easier to keep us all out and keep the wall around
yer heart because ye can’t ever be truly hurt if ye never let someone in the first place. Am I
wrong?”

I swallowed the lump forming in my throat, unsure of what to say. I couldn’t dispute a single thing
he said because he was right about his characterization of me. I rubbed my head and leaned into
my palm at I felt an oncoming headache. “No,” I admitted tiredly. “I have been emotionally
unavailable, and I suppose writing it in a letter and saying it to you are two different things. It’s
easier to disclose in a letter because while it’s personal and somewhat intimate, I don’t have to see
the emotions on your face and in your eyes and see which one is battling for dominance. I’ve
never outright lied to you if that’s what your accusing me of.” I crossed my arms in front of my
chest as I attempted to catch my breath a little. I was a bit flushed, but ignored it.

“A lie by omission is a lie. When you told me you loved me, ye meant it in the measure you were
capable of. I gave you my entire heart and never asked for it back even after Gabriel.” I sucked in
a breath as I avoided his eyes. “I thought back to all those years ago in my flat when I told you,
you didn’t have the capacity to feel true emotions and you agreed with me. I don’t think I lied at
all. Ye bury everything so deeply inside and then it explodes out. I barely know anything about
yer da”

I stiffened at the mention of my father. He was still one of my triggers and I didn’t feel
comfortable most of the time talking about how his loss affected me. “Don’t,” I warned him.

“See there ye go again shutting me out. I try every single day to get you to open up. In the
beginning we were far too young for me to recognize your evasive tactics. I’ve told ye hundreds
of stories about growing up, but I dinnae ken much about you.” I read the hurt in those deep blue
eyes of his as he expressed what it was he held back. “I would never ask more of ye than you
were willing to share, but how long have I known ye?”

My brown furrowed as I wasn’t entirely sure where he was directing the conversation. “Eighteen
years?” It came off sounding far more uncertain than I intended.

“Eighteen years damnit and I feel as if I still only know you about as well as I did then. Insanity is
doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting a different result. I love ye so much sometimes it
physically hurts me, but I often wonder if you feel the same way. Are ye with me because I got
you pregnant?”

The accusation hung in the air between us as everything around us stilled. I heard the sound of a
shower running in the background, a car driving past the house, the wind tickling the branches of
trees in the yard, and Jamie’s harsh breathing. His chest rose rapidly as he tried to control himself.

It stung that he believed I was with him because of my pregnancy, and not the love I bore for him
for nearly twenty years. I fought back the tears threatening to release because the last the thing I
wanted was him to know how he affected me.
I ducked my head, allowing my hair to fall into my face to hide my warring emotions. I’ve been accused of having a glass face in the past, unable to maintain an impassive expression for long periods of time. If a person wanted to know exactly what I was thinking, all they had to do was look at my face.

“I don’t appreciate you accusing me simply being with you out of necessity.”

“It’s awful convenient you broke up with Peter. How long ago was that?” He taunted me. He was baiting me as he knew I would take it.

I grit my teeth in exasperation. “You’re a bloody bastard. Do you know that?” My voice came out slightly garbled as my hormones took over. “I broke up with Peter long before I knew I was pregnant.”

“How do I know the babies are even mine?”

I worked my jaw as I tried to cool my building temper, but I was done playing his games. I was many things, and I wouldn’t deny them; however, I wasn’t an idiot. The timing wasn’t even right as I it had been some weeks since the brief time the girls were gone, I was on my period. By the time I had sex with him over three weeks had passed since I last slept with Peter.

“Get the fuck out of my house until you can hold a rational conversation. I don’t need this shite right now, and you’re behaving childishly. I understand you’re upset and some of it is for valid reasons. You’re entitled to your feelings as I tell the girls all the time. What you aren’t allowed to do is imply I’m confused about who the father of my children are. If that’s how you feel, the door is there and you can see yourself out.”

He took a long hard look at me before walking out. As soon as I heard the front door, my tears fell without abandon. I had no way of knowing if we would sort the situation out, and if he actually felt that way about the twins. Did he really believe I would lie about something as serious as the paternity of my sons?

Immediately after his departure, guilt bubbled inside me because it wasn’t my intention for the conversation to go like that. I never wanted him to feel unwelcome, yet I casually threw the words ‘my house’ in his face as if he wasn’t welcome to call it his home. This was all my fault. He was driving out there and he was angry. What if he got into an accident? I would never forgive myself if something happened to him because I picked a fight.

“Mom?” Isla called tentatively as she entered the kitchen.

I sniffled and tried to wipe my face with my sleeve. I didn’t want her to see me in such a state. “I-Isla everything is alright. Why don’t you go back to your room?”

Sadly, I knew it would not deter her as I heard her footsteps approach me. “Are you okay? I heard loud voices and then the front door slamming. Where is dad?”

I glanced up to find her face full of concern. Her eyes were a swirl of grey and blue as she waited for me to say something. “It’s fine love,” her face told me she didn’t believe me in the slightest. “Or it will be.”

“Was he mad because we didn’t include him at dinner? Is he going to come back or leave us again?” I saw her eyes sparkle with tears, which made my own restart.

Her arms were immediately around me as she rocked me like I did to her when she was a sick toddler, wanting no one but her mommy. “Shh… it’s okay. I’m sure dad will realize he’s being an
idiot. Emma’s mom says men can be stupid and don’t always know what they’re saying.” A watery chuckle escaped me and then I didn’t feel like I could breathe.

Isla pulled back with marked concern on her face. “Mommy?” She was scared as I clutched my chest and then it was all black.

IPOV

We were talking and then she passed out. I didn’t know what to do and began to cry. I knew her and dad fought and he left. However, he left his phone on the table, so I couldn’t call him to ask him.

I began to panic and dropped to my knees. “Mommy,” I shook her as I tried to help her regain consciousness. “Please mommy, wake up,” my tears blurred my eyesight.

I internally thank myself for turning music on Bree’s room. She would freak out and then we would both be worrying. I snatched dad’s phone off the table and pushed the sound and power button. The emergency service screen appeared and I called 9-1-1.

I momentarily regretted leaving my phone upstairs, because if dad’s phone hadn’t been here I would’ve had to leave mom.

I helped ease her body onto the floor as I took her pulse. “9-1-1, what is your emergency?”

“It’s my mom. She’s not waking up.”

“Where are you?”

I relayed the information to the operator twice and heard the clicking of a keyboard in the background. “What is your name?” Her composed voice helped me to stay calm.

“Isla Fraser,” I answered, my voice not as strong as I would’ve liked.

“Can you tell me what happened?” I explained to her everything I knew. “Help is on the way. Is she breathing?”

“Yes,” I double checked the rise and fall of her chest. I didn’t know what I would do if she weren’t okay. “She’s pregnant. I felt the baby kick. That’s good, right?”

“Yes Isla, how old is your mom?”

“She just turned thirty-five.”

“How old are you?”

“Twelve, my sister is upstairs and I don’t know where my dad is.”

Within a few minutes, I heard the sounds of sirens approaching and the tears increased trifold. This was real and actually happening.

“Is there another adult with you?”

Snot dripped from my nose and I wiped it with my sleeve. “No, it’s me and my little sister. She’s nine.”
She stayed on the phone with me until the doorbell rang. I went to open it and saw Bree at the top of the stairs with confused eyes. I shook my head, begging her not ask any questions. I opened the door and the paramedics came right in, and I led them through into the kitchen where my mom was still unconscious.

Things happened in such a flurry, but next thing I knew Bree and I wore jackets over our pjs and shoes on our feet. I grabbed my phone to call nana when we got to the hospital.

We sat in the back of the rig, pressed tightly to the side as we watched our mom carefully. Bree cried into my neck, and I tried my best to be strong for her because I was the older sister. One of the things my mom instilled in me at a young age was to look out for my sister and protect her.

“It’s okay Bee,” I told her, reverting back to my childhood nickname for her.

She sniffled and burrowed her head in deeper. At the hospital, a social worker came to sit with us as they examined our mom. They called our nana who would come to the hospital as soon as she could as she lived about the same distance as we did in Brookline.

We were familiar with Mass General Hospital, although we had never gone through the emergency room. We were more familiar with the heart center. However, sometimes mom was requested for a consult elsewhere including the hospital for children and the main building.

“Isla? Bree?” Our heads snapped up at the calling of our names. I was sure both of our faces were tear stained and our eyes puffy from all the crying.

“Nurse Laura?” I asked. She was a friend of mom’s, and was there when I broke my arm two years ago.

She knelt before us, her face marred with concern as she looked us over. “What are you guys doing here? It’s a school night and,” she glanced at her watch for the time. “Almost nine.”

Bree started crying all over again as she buried her face in my side. I rubbed a hand down her back as I tried to control myself. My throat was clogged and my eyes itchy and watery. “M-o-o-om,” I wailed as I couldn’t hold it back anymore.

Laura took us into her arms, and I felt the curious eyes of the social worker on us. “Shh… hey I’m sure your mom is fine. She’s in good hands.”

“What if she dies? She almost did last time.” It never occurred to me when I was younger that losing my brother meant almost losing my mother as well. I snooped through her medical records and discovered she had trouble clotting and had lost a lot of blood. I couldn’t imagine my life without her as she was such an integral part of who I was.

Laura pulled away with a stern look directed at me. It was one my mother had perfected as well. I wondered if I would achieve it someday. “Now you two listen to me until a doctor gives you reason otherwise to worry about the health of your mother, you are not to stress yourselves out over it. I have to go because I’m on duty, but I’ll check back in with you guys. Okay?” We nodded. She gave each of us a kiss before departing.

Half an hour later, Bree slept on my shoulder as I lightly dozed with my head thrown back.

My phone began to vibrate against the side of my leg. My eyes opened sleepily as I blinked multiple times to try and clear the sleep. I glanced at caller ID and saw it was my father. I debated internally on whether or not to answer it as it was clearly his fault we were here. If a man can leave his family once, there’s nothing to stop him from doing it again.
It was unfair of me to cast such aspersions onto him as I saw he was putting in the effort and mom and I had more than one “discussion” about it. I decided to bite the bullet and answer, otherwise he would freak out. If he was calling from his phone, it meant he had gone back to the house and seen we weren’t there. He was probably worried about where mom would be with his children on a school night, especially as we had left like all the lights on.

“Hello,” I croaked, my voice hoarse from sleep and crying.

“Isla? Lass where are ye?” He was worried as well he should be.

At that very second, nana came rushing into the waiting area. “Oh Isla and Bree,” she crooned, although there was concern etched onto her face.

“Is that yer grandmother? Why are ye not home?”

Why was this happening? I felt like the whole situation were my fault. If I had paid more attention and hadn’t tried to show off on the horse, I would’ve never gotten injured. Mom would’ve never had to fly out to Scotland and reconnect with dad. They wouldn’t have had relations (yuck), and none of this would be happening. I had done this. My mom was in there because of me.

I began to cry, which turned into full sobbing as my grandmother took the phone from me and talked to my dad. It was my fault. I buried my face in my hands.

It took me a few seconds to realize my face was pressed against my grandmother’s chest as she rocked my from side to side. “Oh hush love, it will be alright. You’re mother is so strong. I talked to a nurse, and she said your mom was awake and the doctor was talking to her. Please stop crying,” she pleaded with me. “It hurts my heart.”

I rubbed my nose into her hoodie as I slowly calmed down. She petted my hair like she did when I was a kid, especially if I got a spanking. Nana was old school like that. Bree sat beside me. She was adorably sleepy.

“Your dad is on the way.” I frowned. “I’m sorry I was late, but there was an accident and my GPS rerouted me to an even longer route because of all the traffic.”

I didn’t particularly care why it took her so long to arrive. I was happy she did. We hadn’t seen as much of her as we had in the past with dad here. She picked us up from school only two days a week compared to the five days in the past.

Also according to mom, she had a boyfriend which was another reason why she was busy. However, I hadn’t known her to have any boyfriends. Wasn’t she kind of old for that? I hadn’t known until this moment just how much I missed her.

“Nana?” Bree’s voice was laced with sleep. “Do we have to go to school tomorrow?”

She laughed and rubbed my kid sister’s head as she took a seat. “We’ll see. Maybe you two would like to have a sleepover at my house.”

It wasn’t as if we didn’t have clothes there, but I wasn’t entirely sure how well some of them would fit. We hadn’t stayed with her in a while, and I did grow a little. “I hope so, at least we don’t have to hear mom throwing up in the morning anymore.”

I sank into the comfort of her lap as she wrapped her arms around my slight frame. I was never more thankful for my petite stature than at this moment. Bree had her head against her arm and soft snores emitted from her. It was because of her stuffy nose as neither of us typically snored.

“Go to sleep, I’ll wake you either when you can go back and see your mom or when your dad
gets here.”

My eyes drifted shut, and my last thought was my dad better fix this. We had come too far and my fall couldn’t be for nothing. Maybe some dreams were best left in the mind and not for reality.

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**JPOV**

I did my best to maintain my speeding limit as I raced to the hospital. When I entered the house and felt its’ eerie silence, I sensed immediately something was wrong.

When I left I forgot my phone in my haste to get out as quickly as possible. The untenable situation between myself and Claire escalated, and some of it had built up inside of me over time and carried over into this new incarnation of our relationship. I needed to get it off my chest, but there were other ways I could’ve expressed myself without upsetting her.

I saw my phone on the floor and furrowed my brow as it was on the table when I left. It was strange Claire would take the lasses anywhere this time of night considering they had school the following day.

I tried Claire’s phone, but heard it ringing from upstairs. I started to panic because as a doctor, she never went anywhere without it. It was practically attached to her hand.

I bypassed her number and called Isla whose phone rang three times before she finally answered.

Aside from her shaky hello, Isla hadn’t said anything and then her grandmother took the phone from her and filled in the blanks for me about the location of my family. Guilt welled inside as I left her alone. My twelve year old had to call emergency services to get help for her mother because I left my phone. She had to wait until they arrived and manage her sister.

Within twenty minutes, I was at the emergency room. I asked for Claire, and they told me she was asking for me. They wouldn’t provide me any information pertaining to her health as I wasn’t family or a spouse. It struck me as unfamiliar as the last time we were in a similar situation, the doctors were able to disclose about the health of my wife.

In the scheme of things, I wasn’t anyone in her life. I was the father of her children, yet that didn’t mean anything. If something happened to Claire during the pregnancy, I wouldn’t have a right to know unless someone called me. I didn’t know if she changed her emergency contact information as she had done when we filed for divorce.

I would have to figure out to rectify my status in her life as well as reconcile with her. We couldn’t continue as we were. It was unfair to us and unfair to our children to continuously put them between us and our issues. Isla was a newly turned twelve, and in many ways had such a brilliant mind; be that as it may be, at the end of the day she was still a child, my child. She could only handle so much. When we had an open conversation, just the two of us, a few weeks ago I promised her I wouldn’t walk away as I had in the past. I would fight for what I wanted because the four of us and when we thought it was one baby, were a family. We deserved happiness and stability.

There was an awful amount of doubt in her eyes as she stared at me. It made me uncomfortable how serious her expression was. It gutted me to know she didn’t quite trust me to hold to the promises I was making, and in a way tonight sort of proved that to her.

Claire’s eyes were shut as she rested on the bed. “It’s okay,” she said softly. “I had a bit of a dizzy
spell, and my doctor is a bit worried about my hypertension.”

I lifted a brow because it was the first I heard about this. “Hypertension?”

“It’s hereditary. It runs on my grandmother’s side in my father’s family. Apparently, it was present before the pregnancy, but there are usually no symptoms so there isn’t a way to determine when it started.” Her eyes were still closed. “Also I had a slight panic attack, which contributed to my being unable to breathe. I don’t blame you so stop blaming yourself.”

“What does it mean for the rest of yer pregnancy?”

She cracked an eye. The color was rich and darker than usual, and I saw what she tried to hide. I knew why she wasn’t opening them. “Well especially since I am carrying more than one, I will need to be more closely monitored. There is a higher chance of developing pre-eclampsia. My hypertension can superimpose that, which is why Dr. Roberts wants me to consider taking off from my duties earlier than we discussed.”

The difficulty with that was I knew Claire. She was a restless soul, and couldn’t sit around doing nothing all day. She needed to be in the midst of action, sorting out some patient or another. She enjoyed feeling fulfilled in all aspects of her life including her career, especially as the girls were in school. While they did have a few breaks coming up, it wasn’t the same as when they depended on her as children.

She would never admit to such a thing, but Claire needed and wanted to feel needed. “The other issue if I develop pre-eclampsia is the possibility of–” I saw wetness coating her cheeks and I didn’t need her to finish her sentence to know it was possible for an abruption to occur. “I’ve already had one. Jamie I can’t go through that again.”

I held her in my arms. “Hush Mo Nighean Donn,” I ran my fingers through her silky locks as she settled in my embrace. “We will have two healthy boys who will drive you round the bend. You’ll go mad, but enjoy every second of it. Our lasses well they’ll become some world class engineers. They’ll be embarrassed when we still do couple things like kiss or I pinch yer bum.” She chuckled and I felt the vibration run through my body. I kissed her head. “I’ll scare off any man who comes round trying to date my daughters. The boys will miss their sisters when they leave for university. I ken ye said Isla is considering MIT, but she seems like a soul constantly searching. I think she will go far. She will always come back.” I added.

In truth, my eldest child was someone who needed to spread her wings to figure out who she was and to explore every opportunity thoroughly. “Bree will stay local, but she will live on campus because she thinks we smother her as the young girl. She will come home on occasion, mainly to do her laundry or for a home cooked meal. She might study abroad a semester and come back with a boyfriend.”

“You keep mentioning these boyfriends. Are you nervous for that eventuality?” In truth, I wasn’t prepared to lose my little girls. It wasn’t hard to remember them as wee bairns with small features and tuffs of hair. Their hands weren’t long enough to fully wrap around my finger. As soon as I held the, their crying settled as they listened to me speak in Gaelic.

I laid down with her in the bed. My front was pressed to her back, more out of comfort than anything else. “Ah suppose I am. One day they were begging for tea parties with their tiny cakes and next think I ken, they’re talking about the dreams for the future in a real not imagined way.”

“It’s the price we pay as parents. One day we have to give them away to the world. Have you seen them? I was brought back immediately, but they told me they were in the visiting room and my mother was called. I remember Isla crying.”
I moved her hair and kissed the nape of her neck. “I'll go check on them. Perhaps yer mother will take them home. I think they’ve had a long night.”

“Just as long as you come back,” it was a plea.

“Always,” I promised. She relaxed and drifted back to the sleep as I went in search of the other members of our family.

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters in the same week, kind of crazy for me, but I managed to do it. I don't think my hands have quite forgiven me yet lol. I've been doing a lot of research for this story for the pregnancy, descriptions, and my final chapter. Luckily, I love research (I would be worried if I didn't). I hope you guys enjoyed the chapter. Also I realized last chapter that we were experiencing the same Monday as my characters. We've gone past them in time, but they'll catch up and end up ahead of us again.
Good morning or night or whatever time you're reading this. You are all such lovely people, and thank you for reading my story. I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JPOV

I slowly trailed out of the examination room, hesitant to wake my daughters from their slumber, nervous about their reactions. They were both asleep when I arrived, and as much as I hated to admit I was relieved not to have to see the accusation in their eyes.

Isla was a girl who took much of everything to heart, and I was sure not live this one down for some time in her eyes. She held onto her emotions, much like her mother, and wasn’t always the most forgiving soul in the world. I loved her to pieces, but the whole situation was wearing.

I stood and watched from a distance, a candid moment that would eventually be left to the wisps of time. Isla was curled up in her grandmother’s lap. Her hair covering half of her face, and her hand clutched tightly at Julia’s jacket. Bree’s head was on her grandmother’s arm, eyes moving in the throes of REM.

Julia’s head lifted at the sound of my approaching feet. Before she could say anything, I informed her of Claire’s status. “They’re going to monitor her overnight. They’re running tests, but the doctors think she has hypertension. It was most likely pre-existing prior to the pregnancy. That, combined with her panic attack caused her to lose consciousness.”

The news about her health status worried me immensely as the risks only increased from her. She carried two babies, which was a risk unto itself without Claire’s previous medical history.

I saw her shoulders sag in relief at the news. “Would you mind terribly if I took them home with me? I sort of promised they could stay home tomorrow.”

She stole the words right out of my mouth. It was one less thing I had to worry about. The girls could use a day or so away from all of the chaos that was their parents’ decisions, and we could use the time to gather our thoughts.

I know they missed spending time with her as well as she regularly picked them up from school before I came back into the picture. Weekends with her were frequent and they went from constantly seeing her to spending maybe a single day with her a week. “What about work?” I finally asked. Julia was a private nurse during the day.

“I have the day off tomorrow. They’ll be at the doctor’s all day.”

“If ye’re sure, I think it is a bonny idea. I ken the lasses miss you, and Claire needs me right now.”

I hadn’t noticed how much her and her daughter looked like before this moment. They had the same brown eyes. The shape was similar as well. Her skin was a bit fairer though as she was a blonde. The lips were the same as well. It was also how I noticed how young she truly looked.
She was in her early fifties and in fine health. She appeared more like her children’s older sister than their mother. Even through all the madness, she took care of herself so she could be there for her family.

I knelt and ran my fingers through Isla’s slight waves. Her face scrunched and she burrowed her head deeper into her grandmother. Her cheeks were flushed with sleep, and for an instant I was back in time with a sleepy, sick Isla. She was one and so adorable as puked all over me. She cried and said dada as she stretched her arms for me. Her warm cheek rested on my shoulder as she snuggled in, seeking my warmth.

“Isla, mo nighean, time to wake up,” she pouted as she shook her head. “I’ll carry her to the car if you can rouse the other one.” Julia smiled as I lifted my eldest into my arms.

Her eyes opened a crack and I saw the faintest hint of blue before they drifted shut. “Dad,” it was a sleepy murmur. She was mostly with the fairies.

“Aye?”

“I’m tired.”

“Mo leannan, ye are goin’ to yer grandmother’s house tonight.”

It barely seemed to register and I thought she was asleep. “I’m still mad at you dad, but we can talk later. I’m too sleepy.” Her head landed against my shoulder, and I held her a bit tighter, relishing in the moment. These would come few and far between as her and Brianna continued to age and outgrow me.

Well at least she was giving me a temporary reprieve. I knew I needed to have a few discussions with her and Brianna about my relationship with their mother and our changing family dynamic. I wasn’t a step parent coming onto the scene and having to figure out their relationships. I was their biological father who ran away from his responsibilities and minimally participated these last few years. I did my best, but I could’ve done better. I was beginning to see that through my interactions with my children.

Bree leaned heavily into her grandmother’s side as Julia navigated us to her car. I buckled Isla in, but she barely woke accept to give me a hug and kiss. “You two be good for ye grandmother. Ye’re goin’ to stay with her tomorrow night as well, and I’ll pick ye up from school on Wednesday.”

I know she was facing several disappointments as her game yesterday was cancelled because of poor weather. She was worried her Halloween game might have the same outcome. Their last game was Friday. It was why she was vested in finding herself another sport as she didn’t want to sit at home.

Claire’s eyes were closed when I found her in her own room. “I’m not actually sleeping, I don’t think I can.”

“Stubborn,” I muttered.


She more than likely attempted to force it, which was to say she didn’t try at all. If she couldn’t easily fall asleep, she gave up and resorted to reading or watching a television program. She was notorious for always thinking far too much.

“By tried, ye mean you closed yer little eyes for two minutes, couldn’t turn yer brain off and
promptly gave up,” her bottom lip jutted out, but I saw the hidden mirth in those eyes of hers. She always thought brown was a terribly boring shade, but in my estimation it was brilliant. There were so many shades, one would think brown was a misnomer. They changed based upon her moods and when she was happiest, they sparkled this golden brown color, I could never hope to find the words to describe.

She sighed as she pushed herself up into a comfortable position. “I suppose we should discuss the events of tonight.”

My mood soured slightly. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to discuss what occurred; I was feeling less than optimistic about our future if we continued on the past we were on. We were treading dangerous waters and the gulf threatened to enlarge each second. “I guess we should. I owe ye an apology for attack ye as I did. ‘Tis petty of me to accuse you of such betrayal when I was an active and knowing participant in yer infidelity to Peter.”

Her face was unreadable, and I swallowed nervously as I forged on. I had to complete the apology because it was sincere and I wanted her to know I didn’t mean a single word I said to her. Well perhaps part of me did because words out of anger are some of the most honest ones. It was brewing in the depths of my brain, but I pushed them away when they tried to push forward. I didn’t want to think those things about Claire.

“It was unfair and callous, and it started over something as stupid as me not knowing you spoke French. I mean Christ Sassenach, I’ve known ye for nearly twenty years, and it kills me inside that there are so many parts of ye I dinnae ken.” Her eyes softened and the tightness in her face slackened a bit. I knew I was making some progress. “It seems small. I’ll admit it. Yet a large part of me cannæ help but feel as if ye keep more from me. I know I’ll never know everything about ye, but I thought I knew more about you. I show and give you everything of me. There are very few things I’ve kept from you over the years.”

She turned her head away to compose herself as she was aware of what I was talking about, and didn’t want me to know how much my words were affecting her. “Jamie, it’s difficult for me to admit to my faults. I’m not too great at extolling my virtues either, but it’s perhaps slightly easier. I have a tough time allowing people in because I don’t want to be hurt.” Her eyes were on the ceiling and the tone of her voice caused me to shiver. “I watched my mother mourn the loss of my father. It took months before the mom I had before returned to me. She was never quite the same. Her laugh was hollow and her smiles didn’t reach her eyes. I knew she loved us and wanted to gives us every part of her left, but by doing that there wasn’t anything left of her. It was years later when I saw traces of the woman I knew to return. Giving someone that sort of power to ultimately, possibly destroy you terrified me.” Her eyes caught mine and I fell into the darkness of her orbs. “It still does. I’m scared I’ll lose you and never find happiness again because this sort of thing seems to come around once in a lifetime. I’ve already screwed it up.”

I sort of figured out most of what she said on my own from my interactions with her from the beginning. When I spoke to my therapist, she helped me to understand Claire’s issues weren’t mine. While I certainly had my own reasoning for signing the papers nine years ago, Claire had her own. She was emotionally stunted and unable to fully give herself to anything. The same clinical detachment that made her such an amazing surgeon was also one of the prevailing issues that spelled disaster for our relationship from the beginning.

When she wanted, she was excellent at displaying emotion, but to point where she was too invested and couldn’t distance herself. I had seen it happen to her in the many relationships she had in her life including our own.

I took her hand and slipped my fingers between hers. I always marveled at how out hands fit so perfectly together. There was such a feeling of completeness whenever we touched. I never asked
her if it felt the same, but I imagined she knew the feeling and it was one of those nonverbal things we agreed upon.

“Ye cannae let fear run yer life forever. Eventually ye’ll find ye won’t have much life left, and ye wasted so many opportunities because ye let something as little as fear dictate all of your choices.”

I was a fine one to talk, but I was working on myself. While family and couple therapy was beneficial to us, I had come to the conclusion when I was driving earlier that I needed to go back to solo therapy for my own mental health. It occurred to me it was easy to work on myself when I didn’t have stressors, the ones I cowardly ran away from in front of me.

Her eyes lingered on her entwined hands as we were ensconced in silence. I could hear everything outside of her room: the scuffling of feet, the rolling of beds, the beep of a pager, a doctor’s name over the intercom, and the little interactions that occurred inside a hospital.

“Dr. Roberts will be here within the hour. A patient of hers went into labor at a different hospital in Boston. She’s concerned for the remainder of my pregnancy and I can’t I blame her for it either. Hypertension can be serious as it involves the health of my heart, and it can lead to other issues which I told you earlier. I don’t want to risk anything happening to them.” With her other arm, she cupped the swell of her belly.

My eyes stared at the ever-growing bump and all that it possessed inside. There were two little humans, two boys who needed a mother and father to guide them as we guided their sisters. They were little globs of clay we would help mold, empty canvases waiting for paint splatter.

I leaned my head on her stomach and her the gurgling of her belly. She snorted. “Ignore that,” she told me as her cheeks reddened. It was refreshing to view her in this light. An embarrassed Claire was an adorable one, not that I would I ever tell her.

“Have ye felt them?”

“Just little flutters, but that happens sooner after a first pregnancy. There’s still some time yet before you’ll be able to feel them.” I tried not to show my dismay, but I wanted to feel the proof of their existence. Hearing their heartbeats relieved my ears beyond measure, but I wanted the tactile evidence they were there. “Do you remember when you first felt Isla kick?”

2006

* Claire was miserable at just over five months pregnant during the miserable heat. Neither of us were used to such a warm summer as the summers in London were quite mild, and in Scotland, the temperatures were closer to something Americans experienced during the autumnal period. There were so many things we had no prior experience with, making our settling here, quite the adjustment.

It was just after our arrival here in the states when we discovered Claire was pregnant with our child. While neither of us anticipated such an event occurring, we also would never consider any other option but having the child and raising it. I had only graduated this past spring as even with my summer courses, there were some for my degree not offered during summer terms. Then there was the applications to master’s programs and applying for student visas, and it was enough to keep us in England for a bit longer than we wanted.

There was a sense of irreverence in England that simply didn’t exist in the U.S. Occasionally when we strolled around our neighborhood, people greeted us with enthusiastic hellos and gestures. People in London generally went about their own business and never minded the millions of strangers walking past them on a daily basis. Our neighbors could be quite nosy and
some of them, particularly the elderly ones had a few judgmental looks for us.

We both understood our daughter would be born in a completely different atmosphere from the culture to the weather. We hadn’t discussed the intricacies of how we wanted to bring her up or even brought up names.

We were hoping to be inspired and since we had some months before her birth, we didn’t feel the need to prioritize it. We were in the midst of talking about preparations for her nursery, although Claire strayed far away from pink. She didn’t like how people always thought it was the only color to decorate a girl’s nursery.

“I would treat the situation the same way if it were a boy as well. I like the color green, perhaps a soft one and maybe some touches of lavender.” Her hands were pressed against the swell of her stomach. “I’ve always thought it such a ghastly color, and when I was eight, I told my mother to repaint my walls. It was so odious and I decided on a light blue instead. Tom laughed at me of course.”

I chuckled because it sounded very much like my wife. I had never seen her wear the color pink in all of the years I had known her, which was nearing six years. “I canna believe we’ve kent each other for so long.” I hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

She hummed as her hands moved about her stomach. “Sometimes it seems as if we’ve been acquainted our whole lives and others I feel as if I’m meeting you for the first time. Life is strange that was—” her voice was cut off and I looked up from one of the endless catalogs to find her eyes misty full of tenderness. There was such a hungriness on her face. I wondered if I was to be sent out for provisions for whatever her pregnancy addled mind desired next. “Jamie,” the excitement was palpable. She gestured me over to her and eagerly grabbed my hand. She pressed it carefully to her side and I was about to ask her why when I felt it. It was a nudging against my hand.

The nudging happened again. I stared in awe of the spot where my hand was placed. My baby was in there. She was alive and making her presence known. For the next several minutes, we both kept silent and our hands where they were as we felt the movement of our daughter stirring.

I looked up at Claire in utter amazement at the what we experienced together. It was life changing as it hit me, we were actually going to be parents. There was going to be a baby at the end of this that would be ours. I was overcome and captured Claire’s lips with my own, not that she minded as the way her tongue slid against mine was any indication.

She pulled back and held a palm against my face. Her eyes sparkled a delightful shade of brown. They were brimming with happiness, or it was tears as she was prone to fits of emotion these days. “I want you to know you couldn’t have given me a better gift if you tried. I’m thankful everyday it’s you here by my side and experiencing all of this with me. I don’t think I’ve been more terrified in my life.”

I agreed with the sentiment. It was a huge undertaking, especially seeing as we were thousands of miles away from our families in a foreign country where we barely knew anyone. Our closest acquaintances as of yet were the people across the hall. They were a lovely, middle aged couple with two children. The wife was a stay at home mother and offered to babysit should the need arrived and had a list of babysitters at her disposal as well.

I placed my hand over hers and held it there as we simply stayed in the moment a little longer. “You mo ghràidh are my everything, and I dinna have words to fully express what this means to me. There is a part of you and me growing inside of ye, and it makes me a wee bit dizzy to understand it all.”
She smiled in complete understanding. “Some mornings I think I’ve imagined it all until I feel the flutters and see you there lying next to me. There’s no greater feeling for me than to wake up next to you. There’s a rush of warmth in my chest, sort of like when we would lay on the grass in the hills and let the sun’s rays wash over us.”

I turned my head and kissed her hand. I experienced the same sensation every morning I woke up with her in my bed, or our bed rather. The first time it happened after we were married, I wanted to cry because it wasn’t a dream. She was mine and I was hers. We were tied to each other and knew one another in ways, no one else would ever be.

The gurgling of her stomach disrupted the moment, but reminded me of my promise to take care of her. “Come on,” I stood and offered her a hand. “It’s time to feed the little monster growing inside of ye.” She laughed and gently pushed me.

“It was the most incredible feeling when Isla kicked for the first time. The press of her tiny foot or perhaps it was a hand, I dinna ken, but it was a moment I’m not likely to forget.”

A wistful smile appeared on her lips and her eyes had a dreamy, far off look. I knew she was transported back to 2006 when everything was so much less complicated. The lines between us weren’t murky, and neither of us would’ve hesitated in our interactions with each other.

Her eyes slipped shut, but I knew she wasn’t sleeping. “Sometimes I truly miss the ease of our relationship. We had our squabbles, but it had been some time since we intentionally hurt one another. I want you to feel like the house is yours as well. I know I told you get out-“

I cut her off. “I believe there were actually get the fuck out. Has a much more forceful ring.” I tried to lighten the moment.

Her lips twitched slightly, but there was still such seriousness on her face even with her eyes hidden from me under a thin layer of skin. “Regardless of what words I used, I don’t want you to feel as if you need to leave every time I’m angry with you. It was unfair of me not to expect hesitation on your behalf. Things had been going fairly well for us, and perhaps it was to be expected.” She paused as she considered herself. “I know I have a lot of work to do on myself, and while I work on not closing myself off, you need to work on yourself as well. You hold onto your anger for me so deeply inside and then it turns it to something rather explosive and vindictive when you release it. It’s damaging to the both of us.” Claire was right as it hurt me to realize I caused her pain with my words.

I wanted to take them back, but my pride interfered and so did hers. “You know I’ve thought about this over the years, and I think in many ways we are isomers.” I wrinkled my brow because I wasn’t familiar with the term. “I can feel your confusion. I forget you’re more of the linguistically and mathematically inclined type. Well in science an isomer is two or more compounds made from the same formula, however the atoms are arranged differently in the molecule and have different properties.” I still was confused with how it applied to us.

She huffed and opened her eyes. “Well we have many of the same qualities and characteristics, which is what attracted us to one another outside of aesthetics. However, they are arranged differently and manifest in different forms, which is why we sometimes find ourselves having explosive arguments that seem to escalate quickly.”

I was beginning to understand where she was leading me with this. “Do ye think it’s a good or bad thing?”

“Oh, I never said it was awful. It was something I thought about constantly to understand all of the
machinations of our relationship. Often the things that draw us together are the same ones pulling us apart. We both have quite nasty tempers, and while I hate to admit to such a thing, we are both stubborn. We are determined, loyal, and on occasion righteous. We also trust until someone gives us the first sign they aren’t trustworthy.”

How right she was about the last bit. “I dinnae care Sorcha if the fates or science or whatever was against us. I would fight it all to figure out a path for us. Now sleep, ye need yer rest.”

I would watch over her and make sure no harm befell her before her doctor arrived. We would make it.

Chapter End Notes

I promise there won’t be anymore angst for several chapters yet. I hope you guys liked the chapter. We are actually going to have a chapter of Claire and Jamie flashbacks soon. However up next is Brianna’s tenth birthday. Personally I hate pink as well, and there are very few things I own that are pink like Claire in my story.
Hello lovely readers, I hope you are all well. So perhaps I stretched the truth a bit, primarily because I forgot about the next few chapters I had already worked up in my head. My bad.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Hey, slow it down**
What do you want from me
Yeah, I'm afraid

**CPOV**

My eyes darted to the figure a foot from me. The physical distance might as well have been the depth of Marianas Trench.

The pose said casual to most outsiders, but there was a stiffness in the set of the shoulders and the way the brow was situated that gave me some insight into the current state of mind.

Simple as it was, Jamie was irritated. Couples counseling wasn’t the ideal way one preferred to spend their afternoon, but with a stack of issues the height of Mt. Everest, we didn’t want to find ourselves buried in a mountain of snow with no way out in sight.

“Well as this is our third session, I want to offer you both some of the observations I’ve made thus far.” My interest was piqued and I shifted slightly in preparation for what she had to say. “I would say the biggest hurdle between the two of you is your inability to properly communicate with one another. You both are more than highly aware of the issues in your relationship.” Her green eyes were quite striking as she addressed us.

There was such a seriousness to her face. The way she wore her hair also gave her such a severe look, yet the smile she wore when greeting us told a different story. “You’re both absolutely terrified to communicate with one another. For you Jamie, it is because you don’t want to hurt her feelings. Claire, you believe yourself often right in a situation and tune Jamie out when you have a disagreement. Your knee jerk reaction is anger because he’s saying something that rings true.”

I lowered my eyes to my twitching thumbs. I wasn’t allowed to do much at all these last three weeks. Dr. Roberts wanted me on hypertension medicine as my blood pressure hadn’t lowered by my next appointment. I was strictly only to monitor my residents and consult on cases. Under no circumstances however was I allowed to perform surgery. So for most of the day, it certainly felt as if I were merely twiddling my thumbs.

What she said left a foul taste in my mouth that tasted vaguely like the truth. I always despised when my own therapist pointed out obvious facts about myself that I chose to ignore.
“What happens when you disagree is you tend to blow everything out of proportion. The last major argument you had started over Jamie asking about things you never told him. Then it dissolved into a nasty affair displaying a lack of trust where accusations were hurled and feelings hurt. Then to top it all of when you kicked him out, you made sure to emphasize that it was your house and he was more like a guest than a resident.”

Jamie turned away and my head remained in its’ downward position as my stomach bubbled with shame and guilt. While the two terms could be synonymous with one another, they could also imply two different things.

I was ashamed of how I allowed my anger to callously guide me. As she said, it was my initial reaction and perhaps it always has been.

There might have been a time
I would give myself away
Once upon a time
I didn't give a damn

“My homework for the two of you for our next session is to work on shifting your thought process. When you’re in the throes of an argument in which each of you is extremely passionate, it’s difficult to remain objective. I want you to actually listen to the other person and not just hear what they have to say. As a couple, it is important to learn how to talk about emotions, thoughts, and issues.”

My bottom lip was firmly tucked between my teeth as I considered her words and assignment for us. There were a great many things we found ourselves dissenting over. Primarily, it related to child rearing and how to handle the girls when they misbehaved. I generally took the lead because of my familiarity with them and all of my years being the primary parent.

It was only after I disciplined them that Jamie became rather acrimonious. He at least wanted to discuss their punishment before assigning it to them and hated that I left him out of the loop on a chief number of issues surrounding our children.

Dr. Anders closed her notebook and clasped her hands. “I want you to really try at this. Do not be afraid to be open about your feelings. There will always be someone whose feelings get hurt, but sometimes you’ll also have to agree to disagree. You are two individuals with your own opinions and those opinions might not always align. I’ll see you guys after the holiday. I hope you have a happy thanksgiving.”

We shook hands and departed soon after. Neither of us spoke as we were too wrapped up in our thoughts.

“What do ye want for lunch Sassenach?”

I startled slightly at the palm of his hand on my lower back as he guided me inside of the elevator. “Well I’ve been craving a burrito bowl from Chipotle for a few days now.”

He shook his head at me as we exited the elevator. “Ye’re a strange lass. With each bairn, I expect requests like McDonalds or ice cream and pickles. You want things like vegetables and grains.” I laughed at his dramatics.

“Oh quite with the histrionics,” I lightly slapped him. “Anyways since the doctor brought it up, are you still alright with going to Mel’s for thanksgiving?” It wasn’t a holiday we celebrated when we first arrived as neither of us was from the country, but I’ve come to appreciate the day over the years. Although I did think the message should extend to the entire year instead of a day. “You
“But now here we are
So what do you want from me
What do you want from me

I didn’t want to force him into doing something because I wanted him to do it. He should want and if he didn’t, I needed to learn how to accept it.

“Well aside from the one year at Joe’s, we’ve never really celebrated together.” It was Isla’s second thanksgiving as we were both too sleep deprived her first one with her still in the hospital. Her second one, I felt far too large to go anywhere.

Brianna took her time to come out, and seemed to want her birth done on her own terms instead of mine. She came on the Sunday after thanksgiving. However, there were years when the day fell either right before, on, or after her birthday. This year her birthday was the following day.

It was not ideal as many of her friends were out of town visiting relatives, or preparing for the chaos of the upcoming holiday season.

Jamie’s eyes were one the road as he put his energy and focus into getting us to a local Chipotle before going to my mother’s house where the girls spent their days after school now that their respective sports were over. Brianna would resume snowboarding soon enough and Isla had decided not to try out for ice hockey and was going to focus on piano. She wanted to master the compositions she was currently working on as there was a holiday recital coming up.

The piano in our house hadn’t seen so much use since she was nine. It was refreshing hearing her play on the weekends again. We kept the piano tuned for whenever the mood struck, but in the last year or so, her time practicing at home diminished significantly. The piano was more of a dust collector than anything.

Jamie was contemplative by the look of his brow and the scrunch of his face. I knew an internal debate was happening as he tried to figure out if he wanted to attend or not. I know he didn’t want to disappoint me, and while I would be gutted, I wouldn’t begrudge him this. It was his choice and I had to stop making decisions for him and us.

He captured his bottom lip as he chewed thoughtfully, his eyes never once leaving the road. “I will attend. It’s a day celebrating what we are thankful for, and I canna spend the day without the people I’m most thankful for in my life.”

I sniffed, my emotions were erratic as I neared five months. I was already feeling like a whale as my stomach continued to grow. It was highly unfair I had to gain all the weight during the pregnancy. “Ugh,” I groaned as my bladder burned for the umpteenth time that day. “Why can’t you be pregnant?”

Jamie’s eyes were a mirth blue as he regarded me. “Weel I dinnae think I possess the right equipment Sassenach. And weel ye look just bonny carrying my bairns.”

If he weren’t driving, I would’ve surely punched him the arm for such a comment. It was easy for him to say as he didn’t have to constantly pee or crave food in the middle of the night. It was also getting a bit uncomfortable at night to find a position to sleep and I gave up on clothes that fit as I was constantly growing and would have to buy more clothes again in a few weeks. Instead I wore large t-shirts and leggings around the house.

I did buy some more pregnancy dresses for work in dark colors, also to avoid all of the frilly,
flowery clothes they sold. I didn’t want my residents not taking me seriously because I was pregnant.

“You’re an arse,” I informed him. “I just think men reap the benefits. They get an increase in sex after the first trimester, they don’t gain weight, and they definitely don’t have to push a human out of them.” Isla and Brianna were delivered vaginally, while I required a C-section for their brother, not that it saved him in the end. Most likely, I would need another C-section for this pregnancy as well.

He laughed. He actually laughed at me. “I’m sorry,” he continued to laugh hysterically as he parked the car. “I’ll run in and get yer order.” I glared at him as he quickly got out of the car, still giggling like an idiot.

My face softened as I watched him clutch his sides. My insides warmed at the sight of him because he was such a good man. He loved fiercely and truly, and he loved me.

Sometimes it was hard to fathom why he did after all I wasn’t an easy woman. I had a quick tongue and was immensely stubborn. Yet, he didn’t seem to mind those characteristics even when we clashed, which we usually did.

He returned twenty minutes later with a huge smile and tender eyes. “Your provisions mistress,” he handed me the bag with his silly grin.

“Thank you kind sir,” I played along with him. “Jamie, I’ve been thinking.” His head swiveled in my direction as he started the car. Whenever we went out, we used my SUV. It was easier and provided a lot more room with my growing girth. “It’s not bad. I was thinking about names.”

“Aye?” He pulled out into traffic and seemed focused on his task at hand, but I knew he was slightly worried.

I removed the cover and inhaled the delicious aroma of my burrito bowl. He even got the extra guacamole for me, what a provider. “Well what if we both picked a name. There are two children. With Isla it was you who suggested her name and with Bree, well we both agreed to name her after your parents. I thought this would give us each an opportunity to name a child.”

He saw through me from the beginning, but I wasn’t overly surprised as he’d known me for over half of my life at this point. “Ye’ve already chosen a name.” It was a statement not a question, but he didn’t seem mad. That was a good sign.

“As we’ve named our daughter after your parents, I wanted to honor people in my life. Not that it’s a quid pro quo type of situation just that we had girls and boy’s names aren’t easily adaptable in female ones. I don’t really fancy naming a daughter Henrietta.”

Those slanted eyes of his crinkled at the corner, displaying the tiny crow’s feet beginning to form. His lips were quirked as he tried not to laugh. “Och, Sorcha, what is ye wish to call our son?”

He knew I would ramble all day if he didn’t stop me. I took a bite of my food and finished chewing before replying. “I thought Henry Quentin Fraser would be a nice name. Henry for my father and Quentin for Uncle Lamb.”

“How is yer uncle?”

“He’s on some excavation somewhere or another. It’s hard to keep up with the bloody man as he’s always on an adventure and forgets he has this modern invention called a mobile.” I loved my uncle dearly, especially after he helped my mom after my father’s death. He would often invite Tom and I to travel with him during the summer holidays. “I think he’s in Egypt again. It’ll be a
few months before he calls again.”

He hummed non-committedly. “Do ye see him regularly like ye did when ye were a wee lass?”

“I think the last time I saw him was a year or so ago. He was between digs and came to visit. He was surprised at how much the girls had grown. He’s never had children himself, so he forgets occasionally. He’s in his sixties and still going.” I was proud of my uncle and all of his many accomplishments. He was published and quite distinguished within his field.

Jamie nodded. “Have ye told him?” I could infer his meaning without the need for elaboration.

“Yes, the call was a bit long. He gave me his congratulations and told me to pass it onto you as well.” Those brows of his dipped curiously. “I told him when I first found out. He’s always been easy to talk to and a good shoulder to cry on. Strange, he didn’t even need me to say you were the father. He just knew.”

Uncle Lamb was always someone I could talk to when my mother and I were having difficulties. He wasn’t one to talk except when necessary and mostly just listened as I went on about all of the trivial things in my life. When Jamie and I broke up, he showed up that Christmas and hugged me so tight. During the summer holidays, he took me on an adventure to forget all about boys and university. He just wanted to see me happy again.

“So I know you’ve been curious about my dad’s side of the family, and I suppose I haven’t been entirely forthcoming.” I darted my eyes to him and watched as he kept that steely focus of his. “I want you to have the opportunity to ask me anything you’d like. I don’t want this awkwardness between us, and I feel some of the anger you have directed at me is a result of me coveting my dad so close. Ask anything you want to know and I’ll answer honestly.”

I was aware of how he desperately wanted to know about my father’s side of the family. He met very few of my relatives. Most of my cousins were far older and spread all over; it was simply not feasible for them to attend the wedding. Great aunts and uncles spoke mostly broken English as it had been years since they studied it in school.

His fingers drummed against the steering wheel as he thought about what he wanted to ask me. There were probably a hundred questions floating through that brain of his. “Where is yer family from in France?”

I was caught off guard by his first question. “They’re mostly from Manche, however a few relatives on my grandfather’s side are from Strasbourg and Geneva.”

I knew his family had resided in Scotland for generations. There were a few Vikings several generations ago and some of the features in Jamie and Bree’s features certainly boasted of their ancestors. “Swiss?”

“Oh yes, they still live in Geneva. I think I also have a cousin or two in Belgium. You haven’t had an opportunity to meet them because everyone is so busy and quite spread out. We also wanted such a small wedding, it hadn’t seemed necessary.” Now however, I could see how he viewed it as me shutting him out of the details of my life.

I knew all of his living relatives including his Aunt Isobeail. She lived in North Carolina and
definitely reminded me heavily of his uncles. Colum and Dougal were not people I was likely to add to my Christmas card list. Neither one approved of me, especially given that I was English and not Scottish. They were prideful in their Scottish ancestry, particularly Dougal who had a lot to say on the topic of Scottish independence.

I learned early it was best to let him talk. He was a man who enjoyed the sound of his own voice as boisterous and brash as it was. Colum was a touch more reserved, but he was always observing as if hoping to catch a lie.

I much preferred the Frasers over the Mackenzie’s any day.

I waited for him to continue with his questions. “Ye kent I spoke English, and dinnae pretend ye didn’t.” I did. “So when we went to Paris on holiday why did ye let me do all of the talking?”

My eyes strayed to the passing blurs as we made our way to Brookline. It was a good question. One I didn’t have a particularly good reason for either. “I guess I liked when you spoke. You were so enthusiastic and happy when you talked and I didn’t think it mattered. You knew I had some French just not the extent of my capabilities.” It was a poor man’s defense.

“Except it matters. Ye understood my conversations, but you allowed me to translate for you as if ye had no clue.”

It escaped my mind that I used him as a translator when I knew perfectly well what the Parisians were saying. “I didn’t want you to feel bad. You seemed to like being able to do this for me, and I thought it was so sweet. You read the menu for me and explained what was in it.” I picked at the skin of my thumb. At the time, I never considered how he might’ve felt to know I didn’t actually need his skills. “I’m sorry. I feel as if that word has ceased to have any kind of meaning, but it’s the best I can do.” Okay now I was quoting Elton John.

“It doesna anger me, but I feel like a fool. I messed up a bit in some of my translations and there ye were laughing at me bumbling around like a clod.”

I saw what he was saying and knew I had found it hilarious. He was adorable as he tried his best to ask for directions. His pronunciation was spectacular, although you could hear the hint of Scot in his speaking voice. He just messed up the order a little. It was endearing and I was more in love with him by the end as he managed to charm the old lady into helping us.

I sighed. “Jamie, I thought it was so cute how you messed up but continued to trudge on. It made me love you more especially when your face turned all pink when you realized you said the wrong thing.” My hand slid over his on the console and I was filled with a sense of warmth and comfort.

Touching him always brought about a series of emotions in me. “I guess it hurts to ken ye understood what everyone said.”

“Understood. In all honesty, I sort of thought you knew. It never came up. You knew my grandparents were French and my father was born there and didn’t move until he was three. Next year, my grandparents are having an anniversary celebration of sorts, and it will be a huge gathering of my family. Would you want to attend with me?”

It messed me up, need a second to breathe
Just keep coming around
Hey, what do you want from me
What do you want from me
Next year wasn’t too far away, luckily it was after I would have the twins. I would be able to fly again and hopefully shed some if not most of the pregnancy weight. “Ye want me to meet yer family?”

There was an odd hitch in his voice. I glanced warily at him to discover tears in his eyes. He was genuinely touched I was inviting him to a family event instead of utilizing one excuse or another to avoid the entire situation. “Yes, well I imagine everyone is fairly curious. Mémé has no sense of discretion and is a notorious gossip. My WHOLE family probably knows every detail before Papa could rein her in.” A delicious smile lit up his face. “They’re holding back at the moment, but you’ll learn my family is very inquisitive and stubborn.”

“Ah,” his smile transition to a teasing grin.

I didn’t like it. “What?” It sounded as if he had some sort of revelation.

“I dinnae know if I should tell ye or not.”

My eyes narrowed. “I want to know. Tell me,” I wasn’t above begging. “I could make it worth your while.”

“Now that’s an interesting offer.”

“Please,” he laughed.

“Weel I suppose since ye’ll owe me and all, I ken just where ye get yer disposition. I’ve heard the French are quite passionate.” If he weren’t driving, I knew ways of wiping the smirk off his proud face.

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll neither confirm nor deny such rumors.”

“Can I ask something entirely unrelated to yer family?”

Yeah, it's plain to see  
that baby you're beautiful  
And there's nothing wrong with you

I worried my lip between my teeth as I considered his proposition. The more I denied him, the bigger the rift in our relationship. The flow of water increased preventing either of us from attempting to cross a river that constantly shrank and grew in distance. However, there was the chance he could ask something emotionally revealing, and I was still working on that aspect of myself with my personal therapist. I couldn't understand how it came so easily to him. He bared his soul and his truths as if shedding a second skin to reveal the beauty that was underneath.

We had talked a lot about how I was a work in progress. Even though I’ve conquered bits and pieces here and there, there were still more battles to fight. I was never done working on myself, and therapy was always there if I needed it.

“Why do you think you can’t open up to him?”

It was a thought provoking question. There were layers to my answer and I had to wonder how I came to be this current incarnation of myself. When did I start to notice these things? Had they always been there, but easier to push to the wayside until they crept out and interfered with my life? It was hard to determine a specific answer to give me what I wanted.
It's me 'I'm a freak
but thanks for lovin' me
'Cause you're doing it perfectly

I didn't want to be this way honestly. It was hard to change.

I continued to ponder how I should answer. The longer I sat in silence, the more it would probably drive him mad, but I knew Jamie. He knew I was feeling a bit loose already and it was easier to pry answers out of me when I wasn’t tense or irritable. “I suppose,” I finally told him.

His eyes darted to me and I saw the hesitation. It reflected my own back at me so clearly, and made the curiosity burn even deeper inside. What could make him give me such a look? It was even embedded in the lines of his face.

“Do ye recall when we broke up?”

My eyes squinted more out of reflex than any conscious action. “Well sure Jamie, we did sign divorce papers and went through the Catholic church.”

The irritation flashed across his face at my passive answer and I had a feeling he was going somewhere rather unexpected with his question. “No’ that time, I was referencing the one during our first year of university.”

Oh, I thought. If there was a time I didn’t like to reminisce about, it was certainly the year we spent apart. I was immediately on guard because I knew he wasn’t asking for no reason. He wanted to know something specific, and something inside told me I wouldn’t like it. My stomach churned anxiously as his lips tried to form themselves around the words.

“What about it?”

“Did you ever forgive me for the words I said?”

There might have been a time
When I would let you step away

Would it be awful if I told him no? I hung onto his words, and it wasn’t the last time he said such a thing to me. I felt justified for keeping them close at mind and in heart in moments when I wanted to let myself just rage at him. “Not exactly,” it was honest.

“I’ve told you about what my life was like during that year, and perhaps I’m guilty of this as well, we’ve never discussed you. I sort of allowed you over the years to guide me away from intimate conversations touching on the things you would rather avoid. It’s come up…”

“What’s come up? When?” He had only started seeing a therapist the previous week. I couldn’t imagine he was already that comfortable with opening himself up that much. Then again we were completely two different people and Jamie was someone who could walk into a party not knowing anyone, then walk away a few hours later with so many friends. He had a natural charisma around him and often oozed confidence which made people gravitate towards him without understand the exact reasons. He and Brianna were a lot alike in that aspect.

I wouldn't even try but I think
you could save my life

I on the other hand kept a select few friends, but often found myself on the outside. I found I preferred the company of books rather than people in my youth, which was why I was surprised to find Jamie interested in me. Even then, I was aware I had issues. Perhaps not as deep as they
were now where I practically inflicted pain on myself because I felt I deserved it, but I chose not to do anything about it.

In my head, I rationalized a guy like Jamie wouldn’t last long. He would find me dull, obstinate, and opinionated and move onto the next girl. My opinion of him had more to do with my own self-esteem than it had to do with him.

Traffic was slow moving and it was benefitting him. I was a tad reluctant to relive that time. It was an unusual period of time. “It’s come up a time or two in past sessions. I’ve been curious.”

I rest my head back as I tried to calm the turbulent emotions battling inside of me. “I’m not sure what you want from me in this moment.”

“I want what I have always wanted. I want what you’re willing to give. I willnae pull yer teeth out. If ye dinna want tae share then I canna force ye. It has to be yer choice.”

I took a deep breath and opened my mouth to begin.

> Just don't give up  
> I'm workin' it out  
> Please don't give in  
> I won't let you down
> It messed me up, need a second to breathe  
> Just keep coming around  
> Hey, what do you want from me  
> What do you want from me

> -Whataya Want From Me, Adam Lambert

Chapter End Notes

So I want to get to know you guys at least through cyberspace. Starting with this chapter, I’ll ask a question. Do you prefer to be hot or cold? My answer: hot. I have poor circulation, which means I'm always cold. My dad and sister like it cold so the house is kept around 66 even when it's getting colder outside. Let me know your answer and what you thought about the chapter. Also to my American readers, happy thanksgiving!! Enjoy your turkey and pies. I actually only eat sides myself and lots of pie. I'll see you all next week.

Finally I’ll apologise now, but the next several chapters will all have a holiday theme even the flashbacks. I have a huge arsenal of Christmas songs and I’ve been listening since October (lies, on and off all year lol)

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