

~ Licit Cusp ~

by weebod

DISCLAIMERS: This is an Original story. The main characters and story are the product of the authors imagination.

RATED NC17: For mild profanity and love between two members of the same sex.

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FEEDBACK: If you enjoy the story please let me know: weebod@mac.com

This story begins in September 1986. Shona MacLeod, an eighteen year old from a small Island off the west coast of Scotland is leaving home for the first time to study at university. This is the story of her struggle to cope with a domineering father and her attraction to a woman she meets in the city.

Part One:

Chapter 1

September 1986

My name is Shona MacLeod. I was born and brought up on the small Hebridean island of North Uist, population 1,487 and tomorrow I shall be leaving to travel to begin my studies at Edinburgh University. My love of history was always going to take me to places further afield. I have grown up in a place rich in history where my love for the past has been nurtured and blossomed into a passion to discover more. To that end, next week I begin a four-year degree in Scottish history. I am full to bursting with excitement at the prospect of expanding my knowledge of the past. Today I am taking the time to visit my favourite places before I leave. I will be home for Christmas, but it seems like so far away. The longest I have ever been away from home was to travel to Edinburgh for my interview; the Reverend Halliday, who frequently travels to the capital on church business, accompanied me. His knowledge of the city was invaluable to me, ensuring I did not get lost or run into any unexpected difficulties. We spent two evenings in Edinburgh, before returning to North Uist. I was overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of people around me and the University was bigger than the island!

I wandered along the shore; the sun was shining, belying the distinct chill in the air warning of the approaching harsher weather to come. Island life was not for the weak of spirit. I glanced out across the ocean knowing that nothing lay between the Atlantic and myself for over two

thousand miles. One day I hoped to close that gap, but for now there was no place I would rather be on earth than this white sandy shore. Even in the fiercest storm I could find comfort here, much as my ancestors had, knowing there would be no boats landing to raid the churches of any treasure.

*'Is acher ingaith innocht fufuasna fairge findolt
No agor reimm mora minn dondlaechriad us lothlind'*

I recited once more one of my favourite pieces of ancient Gaelic text in my head; the sea was indeed the only shelter the island had from foes.

'Sharp is the wind tonight, and white tresses rise on the ocean; I need not fear the calm sea, bringing the fierce warriors of Norway.'

The Vikings never did fully settle in the Uists, unlike other Hebridean islands further north. Their influence remains though, with many hills bearing Viking monikers to this day, adding to the rich tapestry that is the history of my small little spot on this earth. I often try to imagine just what those times were like.

I left North Uist teary-eyed. It looked like the entire island had lined the harbour at Lochmaddy that Saturday morning to wave me off. Well I was heading for the big bad city. The Reverend Halliday had come to the house often during the summer to warn me of the temptations that lay in wait. It was a close-knit, God-fearing place and, every Sunday, the entire population filled the many churches on it. My mother hugged me tight one last time and kissed me on the cheek. She begged me to be good and take care of myself. I promised to write often and I would be home for Christmas. My father nodded one last time, he wasn't much for public displays of affection, I was yet to meet a man on the island who was, well besides Billie Lewis, but that was another story and I didn't quite care for his affections. My two younger sisters and my wee brother waved excitedly as I stepped onto the boat that would take me to the mainland. Oh, how I was going to miss them.

I boarded the ferry the newness of its structure still sparkling in the morning sunshine, the gulls circling above, shrieking. Taking a deep breath of the salty air, I attempted to compose myself for the journey ahead. I watched as the island became smaller with every nautical mile that the boat traversed. It seemed strangely symbolic. I had spent the first eighteen years of my life on the small island and now I was headed out into the big world on my own. I couldn't wait to be surrounded by so many like-minded people. I was excited at the prospect of meeting so many new faces from all different kinds of places and backgrounds. I was scared and full of anticipation all at the same time.

Ten hours later, after a coach journey which I thought would never end, I arrived at a boarding house on the seafront of the outskirts of Edinburgh in a town called Portobello. A robust, matronly woman, wearing an apron and a frown, met me at the door. She favoured me a stern look while instructing me to follow her. After a breathless clip up three flights of stairs carrying

my luggage, I was led into an attic room at the top of the house. Before I even had time to get my bearings, I was being instructed in the strict rules that must be adhered to, including the set meal times and the curfew that was in place. Laundry was done on a Tuesday and if I needed to be out later than 10.30pm, I would have to inform Mrs. Ramsay well in advance. There would be no spontaneous late nights. Clearly my parents had done their homework before choosing this accommodation for me. There would be little room for manoeuvre between dinner and 10.30pm. With the rules and regulations duly dispatched Mrs. Ramsay, hair still pinned up perfectly despite the late hour, bid me a curt goodnight and reminded me that breakfast would be 7.30am sharp.

Placing my suitcase onto the hard wooden floor, my arm screaming its relief, I looked around the place I would call home for the foreseeable future. The walls were cream and a single bed dominated the wall opposite the only window. A desk sat beneath the window and a wardrobe and matching chest of drawers stood on the wall opposite the door. The walls were bare the only real splash of colour in the room being provided by the orange bedspread and the patterned curtains. I was happy with my new surroundings, particularly as the window overlooked the sea; it would give me a feeling of tranquillity after a stressful day, or a welcome respite from the books as I studied at the desk. My mother had said it would be good for me to be near the water and I already knew she was right. She was a quiet woman of few words, but the ones she did utter were usually important and often full of wisdom. I set about unpacking my case; I was desperate for a good nights rest after the long day I had spent travelling.

Chapter 2

The first week at university took my breath away. On the Monday morning I found myself standing in a very long queue waiting to matriculate along with hundreds of other first year students. Afterwards with nothing else to do that day, I decided to explore the buildings more fully. I had received a brief tour of the history department and the library when I attended my interview back in February. I was very impressed that day, the buildings themselves so full of history. I headed for one of the things I had been so looking forward to seeing - a copy of '*North Uist - Its Archaeology And Topography*' by Erskine Beveridge. I picked out the book from the special section in the library. This book was so rare it wasn't allowed to leave the building. I was holding number 312 of 350. That was the total print run in 1911. I wondered how many were left some seventy-five years later. The book was heavy, with a thick, yellowish orange, hard cover. I sniffed the book, relishing its scent of the past, and then opened it with trembling fingers to read the first penned words of Erskine Beveridge, a man who came to the island as a stranger and went on to become one of its most famous inhabitants.

'North Uist occupies a central position in the Outer Hebrides, that continuous chain of islands which lies off the west coast of Scotland...'

By the end of the week, my head was spinning from one lecture after another; it was so different from school. I was used to a classroom with pupils of all ages, there had been only thirty of us in total. Now I was walking amongst thousands of students, I felt like a lost little girl most of the time, trying to find my way around campus and not seeing a friendly face for hours. I never felt more alone, than at that point in my life. In truth I felt like a total chooker, the name given to country bumpkins, or to people from outside the cities. I knew deep down that I just needed to persevere and be patient and things would come together. Another thing I really missed was listening to music. Back home we had a radio in the kitchen that my mother would listen to during the day. My father banned its use in the evening on the grounds that it was antisocial, but I had loved listening to the chart music that past summer. I needed to get myself a Walkman; unfortunately, I had no spare money to purchase one. That meant I would have to find a job. Doing this would mean going behind my parents' back and starting down that same slippery slope that Reverend Halliday had spoken of that summer.

I was beginning to make friends, firstly with Moira, who also lived at the boarding house. She was from Oban, a Scottish fishing town also on the west coast. We seemed to share a few things in common, both being from small communities and now finding ourselves in a completely new environment. We also had both left home for the first time and, in a quirk of fate, both our fathers were reluctant to allow us any freedom, instead putting us in the care of the strict Mrs. Ramsay. I had also made some more new friends at university, in particular a girl from York, in England, Hannah. She was a year older than me having just 'taken a year out'. That consisted of going to America to work in summer camp, then she travelled when the work was finished. I was in awe of her heading off to do that, she had wonderful stories to tell. Hannah also had a boyfriend who was attending university in Oxford. It was hard to believe she was only a year older than myself, it felt more like ten years. Upon further exploration of Portobello, I discovered a swimming baths. I loved to swim back home but the water of the Atlantic being particularly cold restricted my swimming to the summer months. Now I could swim every morning.

I held off getting a job since I was feeling guilty about going against my parent's wishes. I knew my Father would never give me permission to find work. He would be too concerned that any money I earned would offer me some extra freedom, which could lead to temptation. One day I got off the bus a stop early, wanting to take a short walk along the promenade, before getting back to the boarding house. Taking the first street that led down to the seafront, I hadn't walked down this one before, but knew even with my dreadful sense of direction, I couldn't get lost. All these streets led down to the seafront and I lived on it. Half way down there was a modern building on my right, which broke the continuity of the many tall Victorian houses that lined the street. I crossed over the road for a better look. It was on one level and had only small square windows set high on the outside wall. I thought that it must be pretty dark inside, but I was drawn to the mystery that it exuded. The red front double door had two slim panes of wired glass, which offered only a partial view of what lay inside. There wasn't much to see anyway, just a counter and a red linoleum floor. I stood back and perused the building again, looking for any sign of what it was. To the left of the door on the wall was a brass plaque that had the words *Railwaymen's Club* inscribed on it.

I glanced towards the doors as they opened from inside and out stepped a tall dark haired

woman, keys in hand. She locked the door then glanced towards me looking expectantly.

"Can I help you?" The dark haired stranger enquired.

I had momentarily lost my powers of speech. She raised her brows to offer encouragement.

"Yes...I'm looking for a job," I stammered. It just came out, I had no idea if there was any kind of job available, or what the work would involve.

She frowned, that wasn't a good sign.

"You don't look old enough to work behind a bar."

It's a bar? I didn't even know. However, I had come this far and I was old enough.

"I'm eighteen. I just moved here to start university."

"Do you have any bar experience?"

My shoulders slumped. "No...but I could learn," I added hopefully. Everyone had to start somewhere, right?

She pursed her lips and looked me over, "I might have something, but it's not serving behind the bar. Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights, you collect used glasses and wash them, then stack them on the shelves. You'll be on your feet all night and you won't stop. If you're interested come back tonight after 6:30pm."

I nodded enthusiastically, as I watched her walk off without uttering another word. I made my way to the boarding house with a new spring in my step and butterflies in my stomach. I was so excited at the prospect of working. Unable to contain myself any longer, I broke into a run all the way back to my room.

As I lay on my bed that afternoon sipping from a can of coke, I thought of all the possibilities that this new job could bring me. I didn't care if it meant hard work. I had never had a paid job before, but I grew up having to do a lot of chores. I cycled all over the island some days, running errands. Then I would be helping my Mother at home. I was sure I could do this and I tried not to think of the ramifications of my parents finding out that I had taken a job - *especially* one in a bar. Oh, not to mention working on the Sabbath. I'm not sure which would be the least well received by my father, but working in a bar on the Sabbath - that was sure to have him blowing a gasket, we don't even have a ferry service on a Sunday!

I returned to the club that evening after dinner, which was always 6:00pm sharp. If you told Mrs. Ramsay that you would be late, she would plate dinner for you to heat in the microwave. If you didn't inform her, she would put it in the bin to teach you a lesson. I opened the doors and entered the place for the first time, my nasal passageways immediately assaulted with the smell of stale cigarette smoke. It was eerily quiet. I was in a kind of foyer, with no bar in sight.

Venturing further inside past the male and female toilets; I had no idea where to go next.

"Hello?" My voice seemed to echo in the empty building. I waited for a reply, but receiving none, I knocked on the door in front of me and waited. The place felt a little creepy and my mind was starting to play tricks on me. The stained yellowing walls, which I assumed were once white, held testament to the second favourite pastime in this place, the stale smell of beer and smoke mixed together to form a nauseating scent. There was a double door to my right, but the inside was in total darkness, so I went down to my left, sighing with relief when I saw a lit bar inside. I entered, but the place was empty. Deep red vinyl seats lined the walls along with well-used tables and chairs. The hall was long and narrow, with wood panelling half way up the walls, then cream paint that was screaming out for a new coat. There was a pool table at the far end and two bandits at the top. A hatch on the wall was where the alcohol was served. I walked over to the bar hoping to find someone there. It was empty so I rang the bell for service.

"Be with you in a minute, I'm in the cellar!"

The voice came from the door at the end of the hall. It sounded like the woman from earlier. I breathed a sigh of relief and waited patiently at the bar.

"Sorry about the wait, I was changing the lager...oh, it's you. I wondered if you would be back." She took a moment to look me over, "So you want the job?"

I nodded my head, then remembered to speak, "Yes."

"Alright, wait there." She turned to a sink behind the bar and washed her hands, before drying them and coming back over to the counter. "I'm Toni, by the way...you are?"

She held out her hand and I shook it. "Shona."

"Pleased to meet you, Shona."

Toni then showed me round the premises, which included a TV and games room, the small hall I had first ventured into and then a large square hall which was the main room in the building and the one currently in darkness. Toni explained to me that it wasn't used on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. The place was at it busiest over the weekend, especially Saturday and Sunday. She then took me behind the bar to a room at the back with another hatch; this is where I would be stacking the trays of glasses and washing them in the sinks. There was nothing complicated about the set up, it was more a case of keeping up with demand when the place was busy.

"So your hours are 7pm till 11pm, Friday and Sunday, and 7pm till 11:30 pm, on Saturday."

"I have a curfew," I blurted out. I hadn't taken into consideration the late hours.

"Are you sure you're eighteen?" Toni enquired sceptically.

"Yes, really I am. Its just my parents found me a boarding house to stay in, and well, the rules

are strict." I hastily produced my matriculation card as proof.

"What's the curfew?" She sounded exasperated.

"11:00 pm at weekends. The house isn't far from here, I could be home in five minutes!" I really wanted the job and I could feel it slipping away from me.

She shook her head, "It won't work; I need you later on a Saturday. Sometimes we have functions and are open until 1:00 am."

"I can apply for a late night pass for Saturdays, but the latest I'm allowed is midnight." I added hastily, hoping to change her mind.

Just then her first customer of the night came in.

"Give me a moment, I need to think about this."

She went off to serve the gentleman, who I assumed to be a regular as they shared stories about the weekend in the club. I waited anxiously with my fingers crossed behind my back. I really wanted this job, it had suddenly become very important to me. In the short time I had been away from home I had begun to realise just how little freedom I was being given, even miles away from my fathers ever watchful gaze.

She turned to face me; I knew I was holding my breath and biting my bottom lip.

"Alright, I'll tell you what. I can let you finish at 10:50 pm on Fridays and Sundays that will give you enough time to get home before your curfew. On Saturdays, you get your pass and when we have a function, you will be home for midnight...we don't want you turning into a pumpkin." She winked and I let out the breath I had been holding.

"That's great, I won't let you down, I promise." A large smile crept across my face and I was practically jumping with excitement.

She laughed, "You haven't even asked how much I'm paying you yet. Its not a lot you know. The job only pays £3 an hour. You can keep any tips you get."

"Great." I readily agreed, I had no idea what was a good rate of pay for the job, but I was already calculating how many hours I would need to work to get a Sony Walkman.

"You're welcome to hang around for a wee while."

"Sure, that would be good."

"What would you like to drink then...it's on the house."

"Oh, I don't drink." I could feel the blush rising in my cheeks.

She laughed lightly again. "Don't worry, you don't have to drink alcohol to work in the bar. A juice?"

I nodded, "Lime and soda please."

She poured my drink then switched on the tape recorder she had behind the bar, I was in heaven as I stood there watching Toni work for the next hour, before heading to the boarding house to study.

The rest of the week took on a new emphasis for me, in fact life had in general. I walked a little taller around campus, or at least it felt like I did. I also felt a little more confident. I was gradually getting to know some of the other students who were doing the same degree I was. Going to lunch at the refectory with them and studying in the library. Helping each other find references then standing around the photocopier for an hour. I was settling into the routine of university life, the only thing that was missing was a Sony Walkman for my bus journeys to and from campus and the quiet nights in my small room in the attic overlooking the sea.

When Friday came I found that I was really looking forward to my first night at work. Dressed in a skirt and blouse, as Toni had requested, saying that personally she would be happy to have her bar staff wearing what they felt comfortable in, but the committee had established a dress code for weekends, I arrived at the club fifteen minutes early to give myself time to settle in. Toni introduced me to the two other bar staff on for that evening. Eddie, who was her assistant manager and Cath, who worked part time. After that, it was quite a busy night. I kept up with the demand and felt quite pleased with myself by the end of the night, though my feet did hurt. Tomorrow I would be wearing loafers, not a two-inch heel!

At 10:50pm, I grabbed my jacket said goodnight to Eddie and Cath and headed quickly for the door. I had no time to look for Toni, as I didn't want to be late. As I hurried towards the front door of the club, Toni was holding it open with a smile on her face.

"C'mon, I'll give you a lift."

I was about to protest, saying that it wasn't far, but Toni cut me off.

"I won't have you walking home alone. Normally you would share the staff taxi, it's standard practice to make sure you get home safely."

I nodded and we walked around the back of the building to the car park. Toni opened the door to a red Nova hatchback then proceeded to ease her tall frame into the car. It was humorous

watching her long legs wend their way into position. She put the car into reverse and, in a manoeuvre that would make a rally driver proud, she had us out of the car park and speeding along to my street. I'm still not sure that we exited the car park using all four wheels.

Two minutes later we were outside the boarding house. Toni had grown up in the area and knew it like the back of her hand.

"How did you find tonight?" she enquired, pulling on the handbrake.

"It was good, just a little tiring."

Toni grinned, "Friday is the easy night, you'll barely have time to catch your breath tomorrow."

I gave her a shocked look and she winked. "Goodnight, Shona."

"Night, Toni, I'll see you tomorrow. Thanks for the lift. " I really hoped she was kidding about tonight being easy.

The bad news, as I found out the following night, was that she wasn't. It was 11:30pm and I was standing in the ladies toilet in front of the hand dryer attempting to dry off the front of my shirt just above my waist. Over the course of the evening, it had becoming sodden wet from the water and alcohol spilling from the trays full of dirty, then clean glasses. My feet were red raw, they hurt so much and my arms ached from the constant motion of lifting, carrying, washing and stacking. I didn't think the skin on my hands would ever recover it was so pruned. I held my shirt out just a few moments longer, it was white cotton, or at least it had been when I put it on that evening. It was now stained at the front and I feared it might turn yellow with the amount of cigarette smoke that was in the air. I walked slowly back towards the bar. The clearing up was over, and the bar staff had taken the opportunity to relax behind the closed shutters and enjoy a drink. Toni had poured me a lime and soda while I was gone.

"Here sit on that crate and relax for a few minutes, then I'll drive you home."

I thanked her for the drink and gladly plonked my tired body down, anything to take the weight off my feet.

"You'll be glad to hear, that's as busy as it gets." Toni informed me.

I nodded my reply, feeling kind of shell-shocked. I would be washing glasses in my sleep, I was sure of it.

"Will you be coming back tomorrow?," Eddie asked. I thought I detected a hint of fear in his voice. If my quitting meant the bar staff had to do the glasses as well, I could understand where he was coming from.

With a wan smile on my face I answered in the affirmative. Eddie clapped me on the back

affectionately and Cath told me I must be mad.

"C'mon, lets get you home. I'll be back in ten minutes, guys."

Once again, Toni drove me home and I endured two minutes at break neck speeds. She really did like to throw that car around.

"You did a good job tonight. The last glass washer used to hide out in the toilets smoking cigarettes. When the shelves started getting low on glasses we had to go find her."

"Did she quit?"

"No, I had to sack her. One night we couldn't find her anywhere so I went out back, just in case she was there. I found her in a compromising position with one of the club members, seems she had started her own business and was offering extras that weren't on the list in the bar."

I stared at Toni blankly, not quite able to comprehend what she was saying, but I knew it wasn't good, whatever this woman had been doing. Then a light bulb went on in my head.

"Oh...Ohhh." I blushed again, but I wasn't sure Toni could notice it in the dark.

She laughed lightly, "Night, Shona."

Maybe Toni could see in the dark. "Night, Toni, thanks again for driving me home."

"You're welcome," and with a squeal of tyres, she was off.

The following night was going fine until I removed a glass from a table. Before I even made it to the hatch a woman with a large blonde bun came shrieking in my direction. Toni saved the day. She walked towards me, plucked a glass from my tray that had lemon slices in it, and a horrendous shade of pink lipstick coating the lip of the glass. She promptly returned the glass to the shrieking blonde. I had come to hate lipstick in the three nights I had been washing glasses, it was so difficult to remove! The next time I entered through the bar to wash glasses Toni followed me and explained that some of the customers had their quirks. That woman liked to use the same glass for the entire evening, disgusting though it was, with the lipstick all over it. They just put her glass in the bin at the end of the night, it usually contained around ten slices of lemon and a stick of lipstick.

"We refuse to have it anywhere near the bar though, we put her gin and tonic in a fresh glass and she pours it into her old one. You'll get used to the eccentricities. Some of them have been coming here so long they kind of think they own the place." She gave me a wink and a smile and went back to serving the thirsty customers. I really liked Toni; she was great.

My reprieve was short lived when half way through the evening an older gentleman who had

definitely had too much to drink, decided to grab my bottom as I squeezed between two tables. There was nothing subtle about it, it was a two handed grab which made me scream and drop a tray full of glasses. They smashed onto the floor and a cheer went up, along with a few catcalls. I wanted to burst into tears, but then Toni the tornado arrived on the scene with a brush and shovel.

"I'll be back to help in a minute." She handed me the brush and shovel, then stormed towards the man who had grabbed me.

"Right, Keith, up you get, your night's over."

"Awww, c'mon, Toni, I was just having fun."

"You know the rules, no groping the staff. If you had tried that with Cath, she would have knocked you out, you're getting off lightly."

Toni escorted Keith out the door, informing him he would have to behave himself or would be banned for a while. She returned and helped me finish clearing up the broken glass.

"C'mon I'll show you where all the cleaning stuff is kept."

We went to a room towards the back of the foyer, which had a cupboard full of cleaning equipment.

"Are you alright?" Toni enquired, gently placing a hand on my shoulder. Her eyes searching out mine, looking for answers.

"Yes, just a bit shaken." I gave a tremulous smile, hoping to hide just how shaken up I was.

"I'm sorry that happened, Keith just seems to lose the plot now and then. I'll do my best to make sure it doesn't happen again."

"I'm just not used to that kind of thing."

"I know...well, I can tell anyway. Look, he's just a big daft idiot. He's quite harmless really, well apart from the occasional grope. He usually gets slapped round the head every so often for pulling that kind of stunt with the women in here. He knows enough to know better though. I just don't want you to think that kind of thing happens often around here."

"I won't, I promise." I paused, thinking about the breakages. "You can take the money for the broken glasses from my wages."

"Are you serious? We should be paying you extra for having to put up with that crap." Toni smiled. "The breakages don't come out of your wages, it's just an occupational hazard."

I got my first wage packet that night, £37.50. I would save £30 and spend what was left as a treat. This meant that after only three weeks working I could buy my Walkman and even get some tapes for it. I had taken to looking in the store near campus that sold Walkman's. I already knew exactly what I wanted. It cost £60, had Dolby sound, an AM/FM radio and auto rewind. It also had a counter-inertial flywheel, which sounded really cool, but I had no idea what that was. I could purchase four tapes from the top forty album chart and this was proving to be a bigger problem. I definitely wanted *The Bangles - Different Light* and *The Police- Every Breath You Take. (The Singles)*, but there were so many others to choose from. I was like a kid in a sweetie shop every time I went to a record store.

Chapter 3

Three weeks later and life was really good. I had made all my purchases and my bus rides were now something to look forward to. The music made all the difference. I was studying hard for my first exams, which would be before the Christmas break and that had jogged my memory that I was forgetting something very important. I was going home for Christmas, which meant I wouldn't be available to work. I hadn't thought of that when I took the job. I was popping into the club to see Toni later that evening as I had forgotten to pick up my wages the night before. She would have them waiting behind the bar for me, but I wasn't looking forward to informing her of my oversight. I had written a letter to my parents asking if I could cut my holiday time home down to two weeks instead of three, due to extra study. I really wasn't expecting a positive reply, but I had to at least try to be available for work.

I walked from the boarding house to the club in the pouring rain. I only got to listen to *Walk Like An Egyptian* and part of *Standing in the Hallway* by *The Bangles*, before I arrived. I went straight into the small hall. It was so unlike the first Monday night I had entered this place; yet, the feeling of emptiness was still prevalent. It seemed like the soul of the building was missing on these quiet nights. It only came alive at the weekend, oh and at the Wednesday night bingo, which I had yet to see. The bar was empty, so I guessed Toni was through the back getting bottles from the cellar or changing a beer barrel. Taking a seat near the bar I waited in the cold hall, that's when I heard raised voices and a door slamming. Then the door behind the bar opened, Toni entered, closed the door, then pressed her head against it before letting out a curse. She turned and saw me looking at her. I wasn't sure what to say. Back home you kept quiet and out of everyone else's business.

"Guess you heard some of that, huh?"

"Not really, I just heard some raised voices...then you cursed."

Toni chuckled, "Sorry about the language."

This didn't seem like a good time to be telling Toni about my holidays, but I knew I had to do it soon. I decided to stick around for a bit.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, it's a common occurrence round here. Too many cooks, they want to tell me how to run the bar, I tell them it's not the best way; voices get raised..." Toni shrugged "C'mon round this side, you don't have to hang out with the riff raff."

"The bars empty." Lord, I could be so literal at times. I chided myself for my naivety.

"Yeah, but the riff raff will be here shortly." Toni pulled a funny face that made me laugh.

I went behind the bar and removed my jacket. Grabbing one of the empty crates from the cupboard, I sat down. Toni poured me a juice and threw me a packet of cheese and onion crisps. I watched as she rang the sale up on the till and paid for the goods with money from a jar on a shelf above.

"I could pay."

She waved my offer away. "I get drinks bought for me all the time and I will never get round to drinking them. I used to keep the drinks in the till but the money got wet."

"Huh? Oh, get it." I laughed. I really was slow on the uptake.

"Don't worry. You get used to the bar humour, eventually. Especially after you hear the same joke over a hundred times."

Toni leaned her long frame on the bar; sipping her coke she asked, "Tell me a bit about yourself, Shona?"

"Well, I'm from North Uist, in the Outer Hebrides. I came here to study history at University. I have two younger sisters and a little brother. My Mother looks after the family and my Father is a peat farmer. There were only thirty kids altogether at my school, so moving to the city has taken a bit of getting used to. I've made some friends at university, so things are getting easier and, despite the job here being tough, I like working."

Toni smiled, I really liked her smile. "So how come you ended up in Mrs. Ramsay's boarding house?"

"My parents, well the entire island if truth be told, were really concerned about me moving to the city. The Reverend was always coming to the house and warning my parents about the perils of the big city. He also said he knew of a God fearing woman who ran a reputable establishment."

"Mrs. Ramsay?" Toni clarified, pulling a scary face.

"Yes, Mrs. Ramsay. So, they pay for my room and my meals and I have to abide by her rules. She boards four other girls as well, basically all there for the same reason; their parents are worried about them being away from home. So between the curfew and the lack of money that I have, or at least had, I have no option but to behave, at least that was their thinking."

"So they don't know you're working?"

I shook my head in the negative. "No, they have no idea. You aren't going to sack me are you?" I was suddenly concerned that my revelation could lose me my job.

"Of course not. Shona, you're eighteen. You can make all your own decisions." A wry smile appeared on her face, "So you got a job to get some financial independence?"

"Sort of, I got a job because I wanted to listen to music. I wanted to buy a Walkman. Now I have one, I'm not sure what I'm going to do next. Maybe buy some clothes. I want to buy Christmas presents, but then I would have to explain where I got the money." I shrugged, not quite sure what else to say.

"Good for you, Shona."

I swallowed hard and plucked up the courage to bring up the holidays, it was now or never. "Speaking of Christmas, Toni, I forgot to mention that I'm expected home for the holidays."

"How long for?" Toni asked with a hint of exasperation in her voice.

"Three weeks, I've written to my parents and asked them to let me stay here another week, but I don't think they will."

"Ahhh...Christmas is a really busy time Shona." Toni rubbed her hand over her forehead. "We'll just have to manage without you. I'll try and get someone to fill in."

"So I can keep my job?" I asked eagerly.

"Sure, I suppose it will be the same for Easter and the summer, that's assuming you want to work here that long?"

"Yes, I'll be expected home."

"It's alright, we'll work around it. Good glass washers are hard to find."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "So what about you?"

"Me?" Toni looked puzzled.

"I told you a bit about me, what about you?"

"Hmmm, lets see. I'm twenty-four. Went to the local high school, which had around 1,500 students when I was there." Toni smiled as she emphasised the differences in the size of our school populations. "You already know I grew up around here. I've been working in this bar since I was eighteen, not as the manager, my first job was as a part time bartender while I was at college."

"What did you study?"

Toni shook her head. "Not telling."

"Oh come on, that's not fair."

Toni laughed, "So you want to learn what goes on behind the bar?"

"Yes, that would be great." I didn't even notice how deftly she changed the subject till later.

"Next customer that comes up, you can pour their drink, I'll make a bar tender out of you by the end of the evening."

"Aren't you worried that if you teach me, I'll leave and get a job somewhere else?" I teased.

Toni laughed, "And who is going to employ you with your curfew?"

"Good point." We both laughed.

Chapter 4

After finishing up at the university on the Friday, I didn't actually travel home for Christmas until the Monday; this meant I was able to work the weekend at the club. I was really excited at the prospect of seeing my family and friends again. The boat trip back to the island was incredibly cold; the barren landscape in the winter months open to the harshness of the Atlantic. It was like being on the edge of the world, as the bitter winds, rain and snow, battered down on the island for most of the winter. The city was certainly warmer than home at this time of year.

My Father was there to meet me when the boat docked. After a perfunctory greeting he maintained a stony silence on the short trip back to the family home. That wasn't unusual, but considering I hadn't spoken to him since September, I had a bad feeling about it.

I was greeted enthusiastically by my siblings and my Mother then, after a late dinner, my dad dropped the bombshell I had been dreading. He needed to have a talk with me. It turned out that Mrs. Ramsay had sent him a letter voicing her concerns that I was staying out late at the weekends and being dropped off by a red car just before my curfew.

"Do you have a boyfriend in the city?" My father enquired in a most serious tone.

"No Father, I don't." I was telling him the truth. "The red car belongs to Toni..."

His hand thundered down onto the kitchen table so fast I jumped at the impact. "Who is Tony?" He demanded.

"Antonia is a friend and she gives me a lift home to make sure I get there safely."

"Are you out drinking on these nights?"

"No, Father. I don't drink and I don't have a boyfriend."

"Something isn't right here, Shona, what are you not telling me?"

I sat in silence, I just couldn't lie to him, but I couldn't tell him the truth either.

"Are you doing anything illegal?"

"No, Father." Again it was the truth, I was doing something he would certainly not approve of, but it was not illegal.

"I will get to the bottom of this, Shona." He warned, pointedly holding my gaze to emphasise the sincerity of his words.

He left me sitting at the table, I was miserable. I knew the rest of my visit home would be marred by Mrs. Ramsay's revelations and my father would no doubt get the Reverend Halliday involved as well. It was in that moment that I realised how much control my father continued to have over my life. I wanted to get out of that boarding house, but I had no idea how I was going to do that. I had never defied my Father's wishes and I wasn't sure I had the strength to start now.

The following day found me in the kitchen helping my Mother with lunch.

"He isn't going to let this go, Shona." My Mother said quietly.

"I know, but I can't stop living my life, Mum. Everything I've told him is the truth, I'm not seeing anyone, I don't drink. I take my studies seriously, and I'm not staying in that boarding house next year."

"He won't allow that, Shona," She warned.

"I need some control over my own life, Mum. He has to let go at some point. He has to trust me." I desperately wanted her to understand.

"Think of your sisters and brother back here, if you defy him, what chance do they have?" Her tone was pleading, tugging at my heartstrings.

"That's not fair, Mum." Tears welled in my eyes. I couldn't take a guilt trip right at that moment.

"I know, Shona, I know. I'm sorry, love." She hugged me and I really needed to be hugged in that moment.

"I'll stay for the rest of the academic year, but next year I can't do this again. I have to live somewhere else."

I was allowed to return a few days early to prepare for my second term at uni. That meant I could work the weekend at the club. In truth though, I hated the boarding house, I enjoyed my time in the club and my days at university. I felt like a bird that had been let out of the cage at those times. As the second term progressed I spent more time with Toni, I had taken to going to the club on Monday evenings and just hanging out with her. She was a lot of fun and a great listener. I had told her about Mrs. Ramsay's letter to my Father, she laughed about the boyfriend bit then called Mrs. Ramsay something very uncomplimentary. I was a little stunned to find myself agreeing, though I wasn't sure I would ever use that word personally. Toni could have quite a colourful vocabulary at times.

Chapter 5

I found myself once again making the long trip home and thought back to the term I had just spent in Edinburgh. My life had settled into a comfortable routine. From Christmas to Easter there were no significant events. My studies were going well, my results from the tests just before Christmas had exceeded my own expectations. I was so nervous waiting for those to be posted on the board at university. I was in the top ten percent, so things were going well.

There had been a couple of incidents that had left me feeling confused and they had both occurred at the *Railwaymen's* club. The first had been when a fight broke out in the small hall one Saturday night. I had gone into the hall to collect glasses just as an argument broke out down at the pool table. Within seconds the place erupted. Tables were being toppled and drinks spilled as two men grappled with each other. I stood frozen to the spot, unsure what to do. I heard Toni instruct Cath to call the police as she literally leapt the bar counter and hit the wooden floor running...straight into the fray. I was scared, but as I watched Toni get involved, I became more terrified that she would get hurt. By the time she reached the fight, there were now three men involved; one of them was using his pool cue as a weapon. I watched horrified as Toni headed straight for him. She ducked the first swing, but was caught by a second blow before grabbing the cue and wrestling it from him. From then on it was all over really quickly, with the police

arriving just after the main protagonist had been subdued, principally by Toni.

The man who had been swinging the pool cue was taken away by the police to, I assume, cool off in the cells. I watched as Toni blew out a breath and swept her long hair back from her face. It was then I noticed the red mark and swelling beneath her left eye. I winced in sympathy, it must have hurt.

"Show's over, folks, lets get back to enjoying your night out." Toni declared calmly, as she ushered the crowd that had gathered, back towards the main hall.

After that it was business as usual, the way Toni acted you wouldn't guess she had jumped into a fight, unless you looked at her swollen eye. For that she just threw some ice into a cash bag and held it against the injury to reduce the swelling, inbetween serving customers.

As we sat behind the closed bar at the end of the night, catching our breath, Toni had declared, "*Some night, huh!*" Something in her tone, along with the grin and the glint in her eye, told me she had enjoyed it immensely. What a woman. When she gave me a lift home twenty minutes later, I told her she shouldn't put herself in danger like that. She just laughed and said it was part of the job. I then expressed my concerns about her safety; she gave me the most beautiful smile and a quick hug. When she whispered "*thanks for caring*" in my ear, I thought my heart was going to beat right out of my chest. Toni looked very roguish with her newly blackened eye.

The second incident took place on a Saturday night. It was a cabaret night, where tickets had been sold for a band that would be playing. The band was really good. They played a mix of music, some chart and some classics. Everyone was enjoying the night. When they stopped for a break, the lead singer spent the entire time at the bar, chatting up Toni. She seemed to be enjoying the attention and flirting back with him. I spent the rest of the night feeling really subdued. The band didn't sound so good anymore; in fact the lead singer had gone from good to rotten in the space of thirty minutes, at least in my opinion.

It was a night with a late licence, but at 11:50 pm Toni whisked me home at great speed, well it was just the usual speed for her. As I opened the door to get out of her car, she stopped me, by pressing her hand gently onto my shoulder.

"Things aren't always what they seem, Shona," she said with a look of the utmost sincerity on her face. "There's a lot of front involved in bar work." She dipped her head a little to hold my gaze. I nodded my understanding. She was telling me that sometimes she had to act a certain way around people. I could understand that, but I was confused as to why I was so affected by it.

She patted my leg and smiled. "Get some rest. You'll be doing it all again tomorrow."

I groaned my goodnight and she treated me to her wonderful laugh. I was really going to miss Toni when I went home for Easter.

As the ferry got closer to the island, I realised that I was dreading facing my father again. I knew

he would have received another letter from Mrs. Ramsay. I assumed it would say the same as before. Boy, was I wrong.

"You will cease working in that establishment. I forbid you to continue to work in that den of drunken debauchery. On a Sunday of all days! It is a day of rest! You heed my warning, Shona, nothing good can come of this." The spittle flew from his mouth; he was absolutely enraged by my actions.

"Why, Shona? Why have you done this? Have I not provided enough for you? You eat well; all of your books have been supplied along with a travel pass. Mrs. Ramsay makes sure you receive your £10 allowance at the start of the week. What need could you possibly have more?" His face was a deep red, the veins in his neck bulging, I truly feared for his wellbeing in that moment.

For the first time in my life I found a voice and spoke back to him. "I have no freedom. I have no independence. You are controlling me even when I'm miles away from home. You tried to make sure I had little to no choices by making me live in a boarding house that is as strict as any convent and you limited my budget. I barely had enough for lunch each week. Now you have Mrs. Ramsay spying on me. You don't trust me!" I had never argued with my father before. My heart was pounding so hard I thought I might faint.

"And I have good cause! Look what you have done. Working in a public house where you can be ogled by drunken men." He stood quickly from his chair leaning his arms on the table, his pose threatening as it loomed over me.

"I'm not giving up my job and I'm not staying in the boarding house at the end of this academic year." I had to be strong. I knew I had to make a stand; it was time.

"You will not defy me." My father's voice was low and stern, "Go to your room, this matter is not up for discussion."

I went to my room and sobbed, I wanted to leave immediately and go back to the city. I needed to think and for that I needed a clear head. I waited until my father went out, so that I could go for a walk down to the shore. I looked out towards the sea, so tranquil today. The fresh air was incredible after being in the city. I had never been able to fully appreciate its clean scent before. The wild flowers were in full bloom on the Machair, yet I was more miserable than I could ever recall being before. As I sat there in the late afternoon, with the salty air whipping through my blonde locks, I knew. I knew in that moment that I had come to a crossroads in my young life. I had to make a stand, if I didn't do it now; it would be the same next year or the year after that. It was inevitable. I already knew that my future lay away from the island. My father could not stop me attending university. He only made a small contribution to my expenses. My university fees were paid directly by the government and I had handed my grant cheque over to my father, but it was in my name. I could do it; I knew I could do it without him. He may never speak to me again, but I could do it. I would stay in the city during the summer and get a job if I had to. I would miss my family terribly, but I had to do this for me. It was my future at stake.

The following day, Reverend Halliday came to visit, I assumed at the request of my father.

"Can you not see the problems you are causing, lass? Your father has expressed deep concern over the direction your life is going in. He has asked me to offer you some guidance. I must say, Shona; I was very dismayed to hear that you had chosen to work on the day of the Sabbath, in a public house of all the places, lass. Surely you could find some work elsewhere? If you were to do that, I'm sure you and your father could reach a compromise."

I thought it sounded reasonable. It was something that I could do and perhaps then my father would be willing to be more flexible. I would miss the club a lot, but it would be a sacrifice worth making. That just left the issue of my accommodation for next year.

"What of my living arrangements, Reverend Halliday? Has my father spoken to you about them?"

"I'm sorry, lass, but on that issue he will not yield. Having you stay at Mrs. Ramsay's establishment gives him tremendous peace of mind."

"But it's so stifling, Reverend. I want to have more freedom. I need for him to trust me. To allow me the space that I require to grow and mature."

"He won't change his mind on this, Shona, you must respect your father's wishes. I'll tell your father that you'll be leaving your current job and that will put an end to this unsavoury business." He looked at me, waiting for my agreement.

I shook my head negatively, "I'm sorry, Reverend Halliday, but I won't be staying at the boarding house for my second year." I was shaking like a leaf, but I couldn't lie. I wouldn't agree to the terms that my father was offering.

"You know he won't permit it?" he said gravely.

"I know." I dropped my head in resignation.

"Then I urge you to at least give up your current job. A public house is no place for a young girl to be working. It is full of temptation."

"I don't drink alcohol, Reverend and I have never gone on a date with anyone since moving to the city. I have been working in the club almost the entire time I've been away from home. Many of my peers at university drink alcohol and date. That's how they choose to spend their weekends, whilst I'm too busy working to even think about things like that."

"I'll pray for you, Shona, that the lord will keep you safe and grant you the wisdom to make the right choices. I'll pray for your father too, so that the lord may give him the strength to cope with your decisions."

"Thank you, Reverend Halliday," I replied graciously. The man may have been tremendously old

fashioned, but he was a kind soul.

The rest of my holiday was spent enduring long awkward silences. My father refused to talk to me and I would find him occasionally just staring at me, a look of barely disguised loathing on his face. He just seemed to quietly seethe in my presence. I enjoyed the days, spending time with my sisters and brother. My mother carried on as though nothing were wrong, but as soon as my father came home in the evening the entire mood of the house changed drastically, and so it continued until I left to return to Edinburgh.

Chapter 6

Upon my return to the city I had decided that, for the time being, I would continue to abide by Mrs. Ramsay's house rules. I would act as if nothing had changed. I only had a few weeks left there anyway. I would be polite in her presence, despite her spying on me. I also returned with a definite plan of action. I would open a bank account and put my savings into it, they were currently under my mattress, which had seemed like a good idea at the time, now I wasn't so sure. I would be able to use them for a deposit on a flat for my second year at college. When I picked up my grant cheque at the beginning of each term I would deposit it into my own account and use it for rent money. I could live of my earnings from the club; they would pay for my food and bills. It would be tight, but I could do it, especially if I could find a full-time job for the summer.

On the Monday after I got back, I took my usual trip to the club. I was really looking forward to catching up with Toni. I had seen her that weekend, but it just wasn't the same, we barely got a spare minute to chat.

I arrived about 7:30 pm to find Toni was bottling up.

"Back in a minute, I've got to get another crate of pilsner from the cellar."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Toni led me to the cupboard at the back of the bar.

"Open these bottles of whisky, use that funnel and pour them into that bigger bottle there." She pointed to the large bottle that usually sat upside down on the optic.

I looked at the bottles in question, they were labelled *Queen Anne*, and the bigger empty bottle was labelled *Bells Whisky*.

I did as I was asked, but I couldn't help but be curious about what I was doing.

"Is it legal to change the labelling of the whisky?" I enquired, hoping to sound nonchalant.

Toni gave me a wry look, dipped her head and seemed to be making a decision.

"Okay, these brand's of whisky are both blends." She pointed to the bottles in front of me. "In truth all blends taste pretty similar, particularly these two brands. The main difference being that one is much cheaper than the other. They also both have the same alcohol content, so will produce the same effect in the drinker."

She put her arm around my shoulders and pulled me a little closer.

"Now this part is important, you can do this with a blended whisky, but never with a malt. Malt's have a distinct flavour and a connoisseur will know immediately if you have switched one brand for another. Their flavour and colour is very distinct. Single malt is just that, one distilled whisky. A blend is a combination of more than one.

"So why not just put the *Queen Anne* up on the optic?"

"Because people want what they are used to. They don't want to be trying new brands. It's kind of like buying *Heinz* beans in the supermarket. You could go for the cheaper supermarket brand, but most folk will stick with the *Heinz* beans. They believe the taste and quality of the product is better. If I put up anything else, I will have nothing but complaints until the *Bells* bottle goes back up."

"I get it, I think." Though I was sceptical at the practice of hoodwinking the patrons.

"Look, it's not strictly legal, but in the general scheme of things, with the amount of fiddling and cooking of the books that goes on around here, its pretty low down the list of crimes."

I just stared blankly at Toni. I had no idea what other crimes could be going on. She winked at me and offered an explanation.

"You should pop in here on a Wednesday evening. The committee empties the bandits, then spend the next few days paying for their drinks with fifty pence pieces." She laughed. "They must think the bar staff are too dim to work out where they get them from."

"Really?" I must have been staring wide-eyed. The thought of the men on the committee taking money from the fruit machines was perplexing. The idea of the gambling machines being there in the first place was difficult enough to get my head round, but stealing the proceeds from the gambling? That was quite a shock.

"Don't worry about it, I think they just see it as a perk of getting onto the committee. There must be some benefits otherwise why else would so many of these retired guys be waiting to join?"

I shrugged, I had no idea why, but if they were lining their pockets, well, I suppose it could be considered a perk.

Toni had her head practically inside one of the fridges as she continued to restock the shelves. "Actually, I'm going to be down one bar person on Wednesday, if you're not too busy, you could fill in for the night." She brought her head back from behind the fridge door, "What do you think, could you handle a full night behind the bar?" She grinned at me.

"Yes! I could, I'm sure I could." I jumped at the opportunity.

"Don't sweat it, I wouldn't ask if I didn't already know for certain that you could handle it. You practically work here for free on Monday nights."

"I can't wait!" I was delighted, I really wanted to work the bar in truth, but I knew that there weren't any vacancies. This would be a great experience, certainly more fun than collecting and washing glasses for an entire evening.

Toni stood up and wiped her palms on her jeans. "Well, at least that seems to have put a smile on your face. What's up anyway? You've had a face like a wet weekend for the last three nights."

I sighed, "It's a long story."

Toni shrugged, "If ever I had the time to listen it's a Monday night, come on spill it."

I sighed deeply, "My father knows I'm working here and he seriously disapproves. Mrs. Ramsay somehow found out and wrote to tell him."

Toni made an *ouch* face.

"Yes, I know, it wasn't pretty. Anyway, he demanded that I quit immediately. I won't tell you what he called the club."

She laughed, "That's alright, I'm sure its been called a lot worse than whatever your dad came up with."

I chuckled, "Actually, I think I've heard it being called worse on these very premises," I looked directly at Toni, "it was by you."

She burst out laughing, "You know, Shona, I've seen such a change in you these past few months. It's really great to see you coming out of your shell. I was worried when you first came here that you would be running back to the island within a month, but you're still here, coping extremely well and you have a whole new confidence about you. All of that without losing the essence of who you are."

I let out a sob then, Toni's words meant a lot to me, but they also reminded me of what I had just lost and I wasn't sure if I would ever get any of it back.

She hugged me close. "Shhh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

I shook my head, trying to clear it. "I disobeyed my father's wishes and now he won't even acknowledge that I exist. Reverend Halliday tried to mediate between us, but neither my father nor myself would budge on the issue of my accommodation. We had reached a compromise over the job issue, I'm sorry Toni, but I had agreed to give up working here and find a more respectable job. Well one that my father approved of anyway."

Toni gently wiped away my tears with her thumbs and looked directly at me. "You don't have to apologise for anything. I would have understood your reasons and accepted them. Look, Shona, if you need to stop working here because it's making your family life miserable, you should do it."

"It's a moot point now really. I was adamant that I wouldn't renew my tenancy with Mrs. Ramsay and my father insisted that I did. He became very angry. It wasn't up for discussion, I either did what he wanted or, I'm not even sure what. He just stopped talking to me. He acted like I didn't exist any more."

"What about your mum?"

"My mother is acting as if nothing happened. I don't think she knows what to do."

"What are you going to do?" She enquired gently.

"I'm going to find a room to rent in a flat, either for after the summer or maybe even for the start of it. I'm not sure if I'll be at all welcome at home, with my father anyway. The prospect of finding a full-time job for the summer seems like a really good idea, it means I could save some money for when I can't work as much."

"If you stay here for the summer, obviously you will have your weekend job. I don't think it would be too difficult to find something for during the week. There are plenty of pubs around here, always looking for bar staff. You could pick up another job quite easily."

Toni's words cheered me and I found myself determined to learn as much about bar work as Toni was willing to teach me.

Wednesday night was interesting. Toni had told me that it was an unusual night behind the bar because there would be a rush and then nothing to do for a while, then another rush. She also told me I wouldn't be serving a lot of alcohol. Sure enough the main hall was almost full by 7:00 pm and most of the ladies were drinking soft drinks. Few had ordered alcohol. The bingo machine was set up waiting for the men in charge to finish selling the books. I heard the words "eyes

down for your first number" and the entire place went silent. I gave Toni a surprised look and she muffled a laugh and stepped into the cupboard, beckoning me to follow her.

"Don't make me laugh," she whispered. "We have to be as quiet as possible otherwise they start complaining they can't hear the numbers, then I have a mini riot on my hands."

"Okay. Shall I go collect some glasses?"

Toni shook her head, "If you do that they start throwing you dirty looks." I frowned, so Toni explained further. "You disrupt their concentration when you move around the room. They take their bingo very seriously."

We were both standing in the cupboard shaking with suppressed laughter. Toni let out an undignified snort and ran to the cellar, where I suspected she laughed heartily. It really was a strange situation.

The rest of the evening followed a similar pattern and when the last house was called the entire hall emptied in less than five minutes.

"Now this is the part of Wednesdays that I love," Toni stated, "No one hangs around in there finishing off their drinks. They are here for the bingo, not the alcohol. You scoot around and put the dirty glasses on the bar, I'll start washing."

I went into the main hall and started collecting the glasses. I heard Toni shout through the hatch into the small hall, and it made me smile.

"Time gentlemen, please!"

Then she added, "Do your talking while you're walking."

If you were behind the bar when she called this, you could hear the one she added under her breath, but it wasn't really repeatable and certainly wasn't for the ears of the patrons!

Toni and I, worked quickly to finish up behind the bar, making small talk as we went.

"So how did you find tonight?" Toni enquired between plunging the dirty glasses onto the brushes to clean them.

"I really enjoyed it. It's a lot more fun serving the customers, less lonely."

"Hmm, I never thought about that before. I can see where it can get lonely though, there's no-one else to talk to back there as you wash the glasses, I suppose you must feel a little detached at times."

"A little, especially when you guys sound like you're having fun in here."

"You know, you did really well tonight, I think we make a good team. Would you be interested in helping out in the future?"

I nodded, "Yes, definitely."

"Great. C'mon, lets get you home."

Chapter 7

The term continued to go well, the course was tough, but I studied three nights a week and on a Sunday afternoon I would set aside time just in case there was any extra work to do. I didn't really have much of a social life, but having never really had one before, I didn't feel that I was missing anything. I also had a possible lead on a flat. After the first year, the students who had stayed in the halls of residence needed to vacate them for the next influx of new students to the city, which meant they were looking for flats to rent. Hannah, my friend from university would be moving into a property that was owned by her father. He had purchased it as an investment and it had three bedrooms. The only problem with it was the location. I was on the east side of town; the university was in the centre of the town and my friend's flat was situated towards the west. I was reluctant to move so far away from my current job and if I was very truthful, from Toni in particular. She had become the most important person in my life. I really didn't want to give up any of the time I spent with her.

"You want to play pool?"

It was a Monday night and there was only one customer in the bar. Toni had been pacing back and forth, constantly moving around the bar with a cloth, and wiping down surfaces. I was sure she had already wiped them several times before. The place was spotless.

"I don't know how."

"C'mon, I'll teach you, I need to do something, this is driving me mad." She gestured out into the empty hall.

She called to John, her only customer that evening, to see if he needed anything before we started to play.

Toni put some coins in the slot and then the balls rumbled down towards the top end of the table as she released the coin mechanism. I selected a cue as per her instructions, while she racked the balls, explaining the rules as she did so. Toni broke the balls with a solid thunk then a whack, making the balls bounce off each other and run around all over the green baize. Showing me how

to hold the cue and form a proper bridge with my left hand, I tentatively began trying to pot the balls with Toni's guidance.

"Ugh, I'm never going to be able to play this game," I declared after yet another miss.

"Sure you will, it's like anything, you just have to practice. Of course if you don't want to learn to play, then you don't have to practice." Toni added, her tone lightly questioning.

I potted a ball, much to my delight. "No, I like it, I want to practice.

Toni laughed, "That's great, but you just potted one of my balls...that's two shots to me."

She was in her element and continued to help me play while going on a run of potting balls to keep it fun for her. She seemed to be taking on almost impossible shots, which meant I could get in amongst the balls when she missed. I liked her way of thinking.

"So have you dated since you came here?" She enquired as I bent down to attempt a pot.

The question caught me completely off guard. It was a subject that we hadn't covered before, though I had definitely thought often about Toni dating. She was quite beautiful, but I had never heard her talk of a boyfriend.

"No." I answered hoping that would be an end to the matter, as I missed what should have been an easy pot.

Toni bent down to take her shot, "Why not?" She asked, as the red ball dropped into the corner pocket without touching the sides.

I shrugged.

"I can't believe no-one has asked you on a date, in fact, I know that Sandy Fraser's son, Donald has asked you out more than once."

"How do you know that?" I knew I was blushing; I had no idea anyone knew he had asked me out on a date.

"I'm the bar manager, I know everything." Toni laughed, "Can you believe he asked my permission to ask you out? I thought it was cute."

"He didn't!" I was horrified.

Toni nodded laughing, "He didn't want to break the rules, and he thought there might be some code of conduct he had to abide by. I reckon he's the type who would ask your father for your hand in marriage, before he asked you."

"My father would approve of Donald whole heartedly," I countered.

"And you?"

The question hung in the air between us, as I formulated an answer. "Donald is a really nice young man, but he isn't what I'm looking for in a date."

"So you are looking, eh?" Toni was grinning and waggling her eyebrows. I knew she was teasing.

"Maybe," I replied with an air of indignation "And what about you, Miss Martin?"

"I date."

"You do?"

"Uhuh."

"Anyone special?"

Toni stopped playing and gave that question her full attention. "No, no-one special."

For some reason I was inordinately pleased by that information. Toni held my gaze and I felt something as yet intangible stir deep within me. I dipped my head quickly to hide the shy smile that sprang to my lips.

The following Saturday was a tough day, it was my Birthday and I was miserable. It was my first without my family around me. I had received a card from my sisters and brother and one from my parents. I loved reading all the little messages of love from them but there was a notable omission. My father had not sent any kind of message, my mother had most probably signed for him without his knowledge.

By the end of that night at work I just wanted to get home and put the entire day behind me. I took my usual trip to the bathroom to use the hand dryer to blast hot air onto my wet shirt. When I got back to the bar, which now had the shutters pulled down a surprise awaited me. I was greeted to a chorus of Happy Birthdays and a cake with nineteen candles. Tears immediately sprang to my eyes; I was so touched by the gesture. Toni, of course had paid attention to my date of birth on my job application. I was hugged and kissed by the staff and happily accepted my Birthday greetings. I used the knife Toni supplied to cut the cake and Cath had made a pot of tea, claiming you couldn't appreciate the cake without a good brew to help wash it down. It really was a fantastic end to a tough day.

Toni pulled up in front of the boarding house with only a few minutes to spare.

"Thank-you so much. You made my day."

"It's not over yet, I got you a little something."

I looked on as she reached behind her and picked up a wrapped present from the back seat. Switching the interior light on in the car, Toni handed me the neatly wrapped package. I fingered the paper reverently, noticing the elegant pattern and the gold embossed birthday wishes scattered over it. I gently opened the present, taking extra care not to rip the paper. All the while Toni waited patiently, her eyes taking in my actions with a look of barely concealed anticipation. I gasped when I saw what the gift was. A copy of *'North Uist - Its Archeaology And Topography'* by Erskine Beveridge. I opened the front cover and saw that it was number 152.

"How?" was all I could think to utter? I had told Toni all about this book and the thrill and anticipation I had felt at the opportunity to view one of the few known copies in existence. I had spoken of the frustration I felt at not being able to remove the book from the library. I opened the back cover to find the detailed map of the island still attached and in excellent condition. It folded out crisply. In fact upon closer inspection this book appeared to be in fantastic condition for its seventy-five years. I searched Toni's broadly grinning face, awaiting her answer.

She shrugged casually before answering, "I know someone, who knows someone."

I threw my arms around her, hugging her fiercely and thanking her profusely.

"You're most welcome," she murmured, her face close to mine.

Without even stopping to think, I pressed my lips to hers and held them there, I remember noticing how soft they were. I suddenly pulled back stunned by my actions. Toni looked as shocked as I felt.

"Oh...oh no, I'm sorry. I...."

I hastily opened the car door, desperate to run away. I could hear Toni telling me to wait, but I was in too much of a panic to act upon her request. I ran up the front steps and opened the door, slamming it shut and running straight for my bedroom. There I shut room door and leaned against it, waiting for my heart rate to slow down and my breathing to calm. I didn't think it was possible for my day to get any worse but it had. As I got ready for bed I tried not to think about tomorrow, when I would have to see Toni again, when I would undoubtedly have to face up to the consequences of my spontaneous actions.

[Continued...](#)

~ Licit Cusp ~

by weebod

DISCLAIMERS: See [Part 1](#).

FEEDBACK: If you enjoy the story please let me know: weebod@mac.com

Part Two:

Chapter 8

I lay in bed trying to clear my mind of the thoughts swirling around, but to no avail. Sleep was a long way off. I had been tossing and turning for what felt like hours, the silence of the night punctuated by my heavy sighs. Every time I thought of Toni my stomach would flutter. I can't believe I kissed her, it wasn't just a peck, and I had lingered too long for the kiss to be called chaste. I didn't know what to think. It was a sin. Would Toni be angry with me? Have I ruined our friendship? Will Toni be disgusted? I knew my father would never approve, girls shouldn't kiss each other like that, it wasn't normal. Then why did it feel so right? Why did I want to do it again? I was so confused, I prayed for sleep, just so I could be free from the turmoil inside my head for a few hours. It was a long time coming.

The next morning, I awoke feeling awful, lack of sleep and the stress of the situation taking its toll on my usually bright eyes. They were bloodshot, with dark circles beneath them. I showered and dressed for church, determined to continue with my normal routine. If I gave into the desire to stay in my room, I knew I would do nothing but think about my rash actions from the night before. Normally in stressful situations, I would look forward to Monday night so I could talk things over with Toni, but now the very thought of seeing her made me feel even more miserable and, even worse, what if there weren't any more Monday night chats?

The rest of the day passed in a blur. I felt strangely numb and detached from what was going on around me. I had attempted to study, but found that I could not concentrate on the words. I decided instead, to go for a walk along the promenade. The brisk wind coming off the sea was refreshing, helping to clear my head a little, and the walk was easing my churning stomach. I took in the seafront, the dull lifeless sand held the distinct odour of oil and chemicals. It was nothing like my own white sandy shore back home. Even the seagulls were different. Here in the city they were more often to be found eating bits of discarded burgers and chips, as opposed to their natural diet of the crabs and fish I would watch them scavenge for at home right now. I missed home so very much. I missed the corncrakes that would be on the island in great numbers at this time of year. I missed my family. I don't think I had ever felt this lonely since I left North Uist, I recited a Gaelic song, humming slowly under my breath.

Bu chaomh leam bhi'n Uidhist 'n am losgadh an fhraoich

*A' siubhal a' mhonaidh 's na rudhaichean caol;
'S gur maiseach an canach air uachdar an t-sleibh,
Ged a tha I gun chraobhan gun duilleach air gheug*

*'Nam eirigh 's a' mhaduinn bi m'intinn lan sunnd
Bi 'n uiseag 's an smeorach an togail an fhuinn,
Bi caithream aig lachain 's eoin eile a tir chein
Ann am mointeadh 's na lochan, aite comhnaidh an fheidh.*

I long to be in Uist when the heather is burning,
To wander its moors and the narrow headlands;
How bonny the bog-cotton on its banks,
Even though it is without trees and leafy twigs

I rise in the morning with my mind full of joy,
With the lark and the thrush singing their songs,
The sounds of the ducks and other birds from their own lands
On the moors and the lochs, the home of the deer.

At that moment I felt there was not a soul I could turn to on this earth. I wearily made my way back to the boarding house.

As teatime approached I began to dread going anywhere near the club. I picked at my roast beef dinner, fearing that it may not stay within the confines of my stomach. Mrs. Ramsay making sure to voice her disapproval at my lack of appetite.

Full of trepidation, I opened the door to the club. Stepping inside, I was greeted by a couple of regulars. I smiled politely in return and, my legs trembling made my way to the bar.

Toni wasn't anywhere to be seen and I had a sudden sense of hope that she wasn't working tonight which was quickly quashed by thoughts of what that might mean. Eddie and Cath said a quick hello as they served customers on either side of the bar. I swallowed hard and nodded my greeting, heading straight for the cupboard to hang up my jacket. As I was about to start filling the sinks with hot water Eddie popped his head into the back bit of the bar with an ice bucket in his hand and asked me if I could do him a favour and fill it. That was no problem for me, my start to the evening was always quieter than the bar staffs, since they had to serve the drinks before the glasses could start to empty.

I took the bucket and headed to the cellar, which housed the ice machine. I never particularly enjoyed hanging around long in this part of the club on my own. It was cold and had a damp smell to it. It was a little eerie in truth. I pulled back the heavy door and stood there stunned. Toni was in there, organising the crates of bottles. I wanted to turn around and head back to the bar, but I couldn't make my feet work. I just stood staring at Toni, wondering what would happen next.

She rose up from her crouched position and walked towards me slowly. She gently pulled me into the cellar and closed the door, leaving us dimly lit by the one bare bulb hanging limply from the ceiling. I felt her remove the ice bucket from my hand and then she enfolded me into a hug. I cried tears of relief as she murmured words of reassurance to me. Everything was going to be all right. I felt so safe in her arms.

I pulled back after I don't know how long, to find Toni offering me a gentle patient smile. I swallowed hard, trying to find my voice to say something, anything.

"I'm so sorry, Toni." I whispered.

She shook her head, "You don't ever have to apologise to me." Tilting my chin up she looked directly into my eyes, "If I thought you were ready for a relationship of this nature, I would happily pursue one with you. I mean that, Shona."

Toni pulled me to her again and I felt her kiss the top of my head. I sighed deeply into her embrace, feeling a blanket of warmth engulf me, despite the cold temperature of the cellar.

"Will you give me time?" I asked into her shoulder.

Toni was silent for a few moments before she answered. "I think you need time to sort out what you want in your life. Not just romantically, but in terms of your family life also. Don't ask anyone for permission to do that, just take all the time you need. Do what feels right for you, Shona, that's all I ask. I will respect any choices you make and I will always be here as your friend if you need me."

I knew I could ask no more from Toni. She was right in that I did need to sort myself out. I was certainly running the gamut of emotions. I felt guilt about my actions and the potential effects they could have on my sisters and brother. I was angry and frustrated with my father. When I was around Toni, my hormones were all over the place. I had all these feelings and yet, right at that moment, I couldn't even put a proper name to any of them.

I didn't go to the club the following Monday. I needed time away from Toni to organise my thoughts, I had a lot to consider. With only five weeks left of the academic year, I would be sitting my year end exams very shortly and, in truth, although I felt that I was keeping up pretty well, I didn't want any distractions. I decided to put everything on hold until after my final exam. Then I would have a clear head and be in a better position to start making decisions about my life in general and Toni in particular.

The following weekend, I told Toni that with finals coming up I would be too busy to pop in on Monday evenings. I think Toni saw it for the feeble excuse that it was, but she graciously accepted my reasons and wished me well with my exams. After that, I put my head down and channelled all my spare time and energy towards study. It was a welcome distraction from the

chaos inside my head. In my more introspective moments, when my mind would wander to thoughts of Toni and where I would live and work next year, I would be flooded with feelings of guilt and confusion. I knew I was delaying the inevitable decision-making, but I just couldn't find the courage to do so. I finished my last exam on a Thursday and would be heading back home on the Monday morning after I finished working in the club that weekend. I had made a decision, in truth it had been there all along, I had just finally faced up to it. I was going home to tell my father that I would respect his wishes. I would remain staying at Mrs. Ramsay's and give up working in the bar to find another more suitable job that he approved of. I had already informed Hannah, that I wouldn't be taking the room in her father's flat, now I had to tell Toni. That would be the hardest part, but I had to do it.

I waited until Toni dropped me off on the Sunday night. She parked in front of the house and waited for me to exit her car. I sat there trying to find the words I needed to say. This was so hard.

"Is everything alright, Shona?" Toni enquired with a puzzled look on her face.

"No!" I blurted out. "It's not alright, nothing is."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going home to tell my father, that I will continue to stay with Mrs. Ramsay." I looked at her, "I'm sorry, Toni, I have to stop working at the bar."

"I see...and us?" she enquired ever so softly.

I shook my head, my eyes filling with tears, "Please forgive me?"

Toni looked so sad, when her eyes met mine. "Will I see you again?"

"I would like to remain friends, if you would be agreeable. I really don't want to lose your friendship."

Toni nodded and composed herself, I could see the moisture gathering in her eyes, but she fought resiliently to not let her tears fall. "I would like that, Shona." Her voice sounded raspy - like she was having difficulty speaking, much like myself.

"Thank you," I whispered, then hugged Toni to me almost desperately. "I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you too, very much." Toni pulled back to look at me, "I'll see you when you get back after the summer, and remember, if you need me, for anything, you know where to find me."

I nodded, knowing Toni was being absolutely sincere. I guess that's what made everything so difficult; Toni was a wonderful individual, a fantastic friend. Giving up the room in the flat, giving up my job, those things were easy compared to giving up my time with Toni; that hurt

tremendously. Although we had just resolved to remain friends, I feared I had lost a part of her, forever.

I opened the front door to Mrs. Ramsay's, I had broken curfew and I didn't care, it was 11:05 pm. If she wanted to write and tell my father, I'd offer to take the letter back for her myself. Save her the cost of a stamp.

Chapter 9

As the ferry pulled into the harbour I wondered if my father would be waiting to give me a lift home. I had written to inform my parents when I would be arriving. I gathered my bags together, having made the decision to remain at Mrs. Ramsay's, I was travelling lighter than I would have been otherwise. Making my way carefully down the bridge and onto dry land, I spotted my father parked towards the top of the car park. I walked towards him, and he made no offer of assistance with my bags.

"Father," I nodded in greeting.

"Shona," was his stern reply, this was not going well, I decided the sooner I told him my news the better it would be for all concerned

"So, you have finally come to your senses, it's about time. Your mother and I have enough to worry about without you adding to the mix. None the less, you've seen the error of your ways and made the right decision. Let that be an end to it."

"Yes, Father." And that was that. Life was back to normal; everything was as it should be, for my father at least, anyway.

I spent my days as usual helping my mother around the house with chores and preparing meals. With both my sisters helping as well, the chores were finished pretty early in the day. I had taken to cycling into town in the afternoons, catching up with folks. It was on one such afternoon, while going to visit my grandparents that I bumped into Billie Lewis on the main street. He told me he had finished his apprenticeship at the garage and was now a fully qualified mechanic. I was pleased for him; it was all he ever wanted to do. He asked me out that night to one of the pubs and, before I had really given it too much thought I found myself accepting. So, I had a date and better still, he had his own transport, which meant I wouldn't have to cycle home late.

My grandmother was a feisty woman, who spoke her mind and took no nonsense. I always enjoyed visiting with her. Today I found her in good form, barking orders at my grandfather, who merely rolled his eyes and did her bidding. No one ever really retires on North Uist; you just keep working until you are no longer able. My grandfather had been very astute in predicting

where to put his money and was currently moving into fish farming as the Lobster is becoming ever more scarce in these parts. My grandmother is still knitting. She uses undyed fleece from the Hebridean sheep, their wool is a peat colour, to make many items including hats, scarves and throws, that she sells to the tourists.

We exchanged polite greetings before my grandmother got right down to it.

"I hear your father is getting his way as always." It was a statement, not a question. My grandfather made a tutting noise and declared that he had an appointment to see a man about some fish.

"Yes, Gran. I decided it was the best thing to do."

"Mark my words, Shona, you will regret it. That man never did know how to respond around women. Three daughters, he cannot cope with. I think it's growing up without a mother's influence that lies at the root of his problems. His father never did settle here, especially after the death of his wife." My gran poured more tea from the pot, which was covered with the same knitted tea cosy that had been warming her pot for years, gesturing to my cup before continuing. "It was a sorry business, your father being all alone in the world from such an early age."

I was intrigued by this information. My father never spoke of his parents.

"What did my grandfather do?"

"Well before coming to North Uist, he did the same as all the men on St Kilda, he was a fowler. Scaling the cliffs to catch the seabirds.

"St Kilda?" I asked, not understanding. I assumed my father was from North Uist.

"Yes, lass. Don't you know that?"

I shook my head. "I had no idea."

"They came here when the island was evacuated, back in 1932. Your grandfather and mother. Your father too, he would have been just a young lad, around four or five I would guess."

"What were they like?"

"Well your grandfather, Dougall, was just like your father and brother, when he arrived here, he was a strong, agile man. Liked to walk around barefoot and he had the strongest looking feet you have ever seen. I think it was from gripping the rocks, you see - the men of St Kilda, their feet changed over the many years, becoming more suitable for climbing the rock face. His toes, they were so very wide apart and they gripped the land, almost like wee fingers. His ankles were so thick and muscled looking, I had never seen anything like them."

"Do you remember my grandmother?"

My gran favoured me with a sad smile. "The thing is, Shona, the people of St Kilda, once they evacuated and were split up, they lost their very essence. The spirit just seemed to drain from them. Many died shortly after leaving the island - just like your grandmother, her name was Rachel, a lovely looking woman she was. After she died your grandfather lost his way. He was a hard worker, making his living as a peat farmer - just like your father, but he never really managed to settle here."

"Did he leave the island?" I wondered if he had left my father behind.

My gran shook her head, "No, lass, he...died here."

Something in the tone of her voice told me there was more to it than that, I decided not to push, but I was curious about something else.

"Gran, we live in the family croft?"

"Aye, lass - the MacDonald family croft. When your father asked for your mother's hand, your grandfather and I decided to give them the croft. Dougall had been working the peat for your grandfather since he was a boy, moving them into the croft made sense. It's your family home, Shona, just not the side you thought." My grandmother patted me on the cheek affectionately, her warm hand rough and calloused. Testament to years of hard work.

I asked her a question I had asked many times before, since learning her maiden name was MacDonald, when I was ten years old. "Am I related to Flora MacDonald?"

She laughed lightly, "Ah, wouldn't it be something - you could be sleeping in her room."

"Oh, Gran, don't tease!"

"You're a smart lass, Shona." She replied cryptically, again leaving me with no clear answer. Still the thought that my ancestors may have assisted Bonnie Prince Charlie to escape from North Uist to the Isle of Skye was very thrilling.

While I was getting ready for my date later that evening, I had told my sister Isobel, that Billie was picking me up. She seemed completely nonplussed with the news and simply shrugged her shoulders and mumbled something about my father being pleased.

Billie picked me up at 7:00 pm. My mother was still fussing over my hair as I was stepping out the front door. My father reminded me to *make a good impression*, as Billie Lewis was a worthy young man.

We spent a couple of hours in the bar, drinking soft drinks and making small talk. Billie spoke enthusiastically about car engines. I could see the traces of oil on the hard skin of his hands and under his fingernails, a stubborn testament to his love of being under the bonnet of a car. I

attempted to hold up my own end of the conversation, but it was very apparent that Billie had no interest in history, or even feigning polite interest. At one point in the evening I offered to get us a drink at the bar. I'm not sure I'll ever forget the look on Billie's face. It was a mixture of shock and horror. I had in my time away forgotten that ladies do not purchase drinks from the bar on North Uist. The entire evening left me with a feeling that I no longer belonged. It was odd really, I was moving at a different pace from most of the people I had grown up around. A short while after that Billie offered to drive me home, what he forgot to mention was the detour he decided to take to a quiet secluded spot first. I went along with his aggressive kisses and the invasive feel of his rigid tongue forcing its way into my mouth. I thought of Toni and how soft her lips had felt in that short kiss we shared. I tried desperately to stop thinking of that and attempted to focus instead on Billie. I called an abrupt stop to the make out session when he groped my breasts.

Billie dropped me off at home and we made another date for Thursday evening. That was two nights away. I spent the next two days contemplating whether I should let Billie go further on the next date. Maybe with more practice I could start to enjoy kissing him, maybe letting him feel my breasts would enhance the experience. I was also trying to figure out what was going on with Isobel, I considered us to be close, but she was acting out of sorts around me. My father still said very little, but he no longer seemed to be angry. My mother was the only person interested in how my date had gone with Billie; she was certainly more excited about it than I was.

The second date came and went and we had made plans for the Saturday night dance. I hadn't been dancing in such a long time, and I was quite looking forward to it. Billie seemed to have developed a permanent case of wandering hands that Thursday night. If I moved them from my bottom they went to my breasts, and vice versa. It was a strange experience, one that did not enhance the kissing. I still had images of Toni floating around in my head, at one point I had gasped which had in turn spurred Billie on and he got more hot and heavy. The gasp had nothing to do with Billie's actions, but everything to do with the thought of Toni replacing Billie. Surely I must be wrong? I couldn't feel that way about Toni. I couldn't, because I wasn't willing to contemplate what that would mean.

Isobel was going to the dance on Saturday night with her boyfriend. I had no idea she was seeing Rory MacAulay. Rory was the same age as Isobel; his father was the local butcher. Billie had offered to drive us all to the church hall where the dance was being held. I felt a sense of relief, kind of like safety in numbers. If there were others around then Billie would have to keep his wandering palms to himself. Boy, was I wrong. I found out things on that Saturday night that made me question so much in a very short space of time.

I really enjoyed the dance it was a lot of fun. Swimming every morning back in the city kept me in shape, but I so missed just letting go in this manner. I danced as often as I could, letting myself be hurled, twirled and burlled with abandon, knowing that you would be caught by the next boy in line before you flew into the wall with the sheer momentum of the pace of the dance. I laughed more than I had at home in a long time. By the end of the night we were all in high spirits and Rory and Billie suggested a stroll on a quiet stretch of beach. It sounded so romantic; I was looking forward to it. The night was unusually still for this part of the country, it just seemed perfect.

My sister and Rory quickly slipped out of sight, I assumed for some privacy and to let myself and Billie have ours, not that I minded them staying one bit. I would have been happy for the four of us to remain together. Billie started kissing me forcefully, he was moaning my name and I could feel his excitement. He unzipped his trousers and guided my hand to his erect penis. My first reaction was to push him away, but then I forced myself to calm down. It was as if this were a test. It was now or never. If I was 'normal' this was how it should be. Billie was breathing heavily and his hand began to work its way under my dress, up the inside of my thigh. I had a rather odd thought at that moment. My mother and father would not have let me go to the dance in anything but a dress, because that was the most ladylike thing to wear. I'm not sure they would agree right now if they knew, that very same piece of attire was allowing Billie Lewis the easiest route towards my virtue. Then, suddenly, I knew it was all so wrong, why should I give my body to Billie? It would prove nothing beyond the fact that I would no longer be a virgin.

"Stop!"

"No, come on, Shona." Billie began to fumble with my underwear, attempting to remove my panties. I pushed him hard and he stumbled backwards.

"I want to go home, Billie." I said, as I rearranged my clothing.

"Fine," he managed to hiss between his clenched teeth. His frustration was obvious, I almost felt a bit sorry for him.

He gestured to himself, "Can you give me a moment, Shona?"

I was finally beginning to catch on, I knew he wanted to do something about his arousal."

"Of course, I'll go find the others."

I wandered off in the direction I had seen Isobel and Rory go in. At first I couldn't find them so I walked further into some long grass. It was the strange sounds that drew me to the spot where they were. I stood frozen in place as I watched my younger sister stark naked and in the throes of passion, Rory thrusting into her as though they had practised this dance many times. I turned quickly on my heel and hurried back to where Billie was waiting, hopefully finished with whatever he was doing. I was flustered, shocked and concerned all at once. My sister was having sex, I had seen her having sex. If my father found out he would kill them both!

I got back to the car to find Billie calmly sitting on the bonnet.

"I think they need a little more time." It was late, but up here in the islands it remained light till almost midnight. Billie easily read my blush.

"Ah, I see."

"Look, Billie, I'm sorry about earlier, it just wasn't the right thing for me to do."

"It's alright, Shona. I understand." We were silent for a few minutes then Billie continued. "We don't really have much in common you and I. I love working in the garage, I don't want to be anywhere else. I'm surprised some lad in the city hasn't snapped you up. Someone that can understand the things you like and enjoy, someone with similar interests. I can't imagine you back here settling down. I have a feeling your future lies elsewhere." He smiled at me.

I hugged Billie, "Thanks for understanding."

"Anytime."

I said nothing to Isobel when she and Rory returned to the car. The journey back to the house was very quiet, we said goodnight to the boys with polite pecks on the cheek. Our father wouldn't allow for anything else. As we walked to the front door I saw some dry grass in her hair. I stopped her and removed it before we entered. Our eyes met in a silent communication of solidarity. We would have to pass our father's inspection before going to bed. It was the first real communication we had shared since my return; I hoped perhaps, we could build on it.

Sure enough when we entered the house my father was waiting for us in the sitting room. He looked us over with a critical eye before nodding and, with a terse "Goodnight," he went to bed.

The stony silence Isobel had been subjecting me to since my return, finally broke the following afternoon. I decided to broach the subject of the evening before; perhaps the root of Isobel's problem lay there. I found her napping on her bed.

"Hi, how are you?" I asked as I slipped into our room, closing the door behind me.

"Fine, thank you."

"I didn't know you and Rory were an item. He's a nice lad."

Isobel rolled her eyes, "Billie's a nice lad too, he doesn't deserve to be led on by you because you feel you have something to prove to father."

That comment really hurt, probably because Isobel was right about me leading Billie on, but she wasn't even close to the reason for my doing so. I said nothing, instead I turned to leave the room.

"How could you do it?" Isobel's words stopped me in my tracks.

I turned to answer her. "I know what I did to Billie was wrong..."

"Not Billie! The business with father, how could you do it?" she asked forcefully. I was momentarily taken aback as things began to click into place. I offered her an explanation.

"I know I was selfish, Isobel, but now I'm trying to do the right thing. I thought a lot about the effect it would have on you, Moira and Dougall, so I changed my mind. I'm obeying fathers wishes to help all of us."

"Are you serious?" My sister was furious. "Now Moira and I have to do the same as you when we decide to get off this island. We were behind your decision all the way. We were proud of you standing up to him. Now you are acting as meekly as mother does in his domineering presence. He is a cantankerous fool, who expects all of the women in his life to bow to his wishes and you and mother are only making it worse. Do you really want to stay at Mrs. Ramsay's?"

"No. No, I don't." I said firmly - it was the truth.

"Then for the love of God, Shona, don't do it. What have you really got to lose? His love? His respect? You will *never* have those, even if you do everything he wants you to."

I shook my head vigorously, but I knew Isobel was right.

"You can't lose that which has never been given, Shona."

"I know," I whispered. The truth hurt, my father didn't love us.

"Moira and I will always love you, as will mother. Who knows about Dougall, father is moulding him in his own image."

I had noticed that, he even walked around the place like a mini version of my father. *'Please let it be a passing phase,'* I thought to myself.

"Don't make this decision because you think it's the right one for us, Shona, make it for yourself." Isobel stressed.

When did my younger sister get so wise? It wasn't what I wanted. I wanted to be back in the city. No, not just that, I wanted to be back in the city with Toni, working behind a bar, living without a curfew and set meal times.

"You're right, Isobel, of course you're right." I swallowed hard, "There's more," I blurted. Needing to talk to someone, keeping everything bottled up inside had left me feeling like I was ready to explode.

"I'm here for you, Shona. Anything you want to talk about, I'll listen." Isobel offered compassionately. It was my undoing.

"I'm so afraid, Isobel, you might not want to know me after I tell you this." I was shaking. Isobel sat beside me on the bed and took my hands in hers.

"Shona, I can't imagine what could be so bad that it would come to that. Tell me, I won't judge you, I'm not like him."

"I've met someone." I said tentatively.

"Toni?"

I felt my eyes widen in shock. I was stunned, how could she know?

"Father might be too unaware to join up the dots, but between what Mrs. Ramsay wrote and what you said in your letters to me, I had wondered if there might be something between the two of you." Isobel smiled, "If that's who you are, Shona, I'm happy for you."

"That's the problem, Isobel, I don't know if that's truly who I am. I have never before considered the remote possibility that I could be..." I couldn't even say the word. I had never given voice to it for fear it would make it true

"A lesbian." Isobel finished the sentence for me.

"Yes, a lesbian," I whispered. "I'm so scared, Isobel, I'm so scared of what I feel for Toni."

"Dating Billie Lewis isn't the answer," she added sagely. In that moment I thought Isobel to be a lot like our mother, but in many ways, she was so much more like our grandmother. She had that feistiness to her.

"I know, if anything it's making me more miserable. I felt nothing when I kissed him, I wanted to be kissing Toni, but, before I left, I told her there couldn't be anything between us. I'm so miserable without her in my life, but I'm not sure I'm ready for there to be anything more."

"Call her. Call her and go back," Isobel implored as she squeezed my hands.

I thought about Isobel's words and a smile came unbidden to my face as I realised it was what I wanted to do.

"Toni said if I needed her for anything..."

I smiled exuberantly at Isobel through my tears as I nodded, having come to a decision. My sister jumped and yelped excitedly as she pulled me to my feet. "I'll go with you into the village to make the call - *this* is the most exciting thing to have happened around here in years!"

"We need a plan, Shona." Isobel declared as we started out on our thirty-minute walk to the

nearest phone box. We were arm in arm, just like we used to be and it felt wonderful.

"You speak to Toni, tell her you're returning. She will be so over the moon that she will offer to come get you and look after you for the rest of the summer."

"Isobel!"

"What? Of course she will, I bet she would do anything for you, who wouldn't? You're adorable." Isobel shrugged, confident with her observations.

"You are incorrigible!" I instead informed her of my own idea, "I'll tell Toni of my plans and ask for her help in finding somewhere to stay until I can organise a more permanent solution."

"Hmmm. Okay - but I still think my plan would have worked. So tell me about her?" she enquired enigmatically.

"Only if you tell me more about Rory?"

"Deal."

Isobel proceeded to tell me that she and Rory had been dating for almost a year.

"I saw you, you know." Isobel looked blankly at me, "Last night, I came to tell you I was ready to go home and well...you know." I gestured feebly at her, bravely trying to stave off my embarrassment.

"Oh, Lord, Shona. That's kinky!"

"Stop! It was not, I was utterly shocked." I declared, adding as much indignation to my voice as I could muster.

"You would be," Isobel, said knowingly, "So, did you stay long?" She waggled her eyebrows suggestively. I was learning more about my seventeen-year-old sister than I ever wanted to know.

"Enough! Behave yourself, Isobel MacLeod!" I playfully swatted her; "I've never, you know?" I admitted more seriously.

"Yes, I know." Isobel said not unkindly. "Come on, tell me about Toni, I'm desperate to know what kind of girl you go for?"

"Well, let's see. She's twenty-four..."

"Wow, I take it back. I want to know what type of *woman* you go for." Her emphasis on the word woman caused me to blush - again.

I laughed at my sister's antics; she really was a hoot. I had so missed her company.

"Toni is tall, a little intimidating and in control on the outside, but below the surface she is exceptionally charming, warm and caring. She's quite something to look at, with her long dark hair, and lean frame. You should see her in action around the club, Isobel, she doesn't take any nonsense from the patrons and can handle herself with ease," I sighed. "Did I mention she drives like a maniac?"

Isobel laughed, "Only every time you write."

"She's intelligent, witty and a terrific friend. We have so much fun together." I was warming to my subject now. "She has a really sexy smile. Oh and a cute bottom, every time she leans over the bar I have to fight the urge to give it a pat." I could feel myself blushing furiously at this admission.

"Oh my, my big sister is all grown up!"

When did Isobel get to be such a tease? I cleared my throat. "Tell me about you and Rory?"

"Not much to tell really. Like I said, we've been together for about a year and have been having sex for the last six months. We had talked about it a lot, and then when we both agreed we were ready, we tried it. I have to say, it wasn't that great at first, but it's really good now. Must be all the practice we put into it."

"Is he the one?" I asked sincerely.

"I don't know. We're both so young, you know. We have plans to go to university but in truth, I think that getting into the right place will take precedence over being together. It does for me anyway. We will both be on the island for just over a year yet. I'll wait and see how I feel a year from now. Things can change." She shrugged.

I was really in awe of Isobel; she was so sorted compared to myself. She knew where she was going and was comfortable enough with her choices. I really envied her that, I wasn't jealous, I was more proud of her. I decided that I really should tell her before I go back.

We got to the red phone box, opened the door and both huddled inside. I was praying that Toni would be working this Sunday afternoon. I dialled the numbers with nervous fingers; my heart was in my mouth as I waited for the phone in the club to be answered. I could picture the scene, most folks walking past the ringing phone, not interested in answering it. I would have to wait till someone was fed up with the noise.

Eventually it was answered. I heard the pips and quickly fed my ten pence into the coin slot.

"Railwaymen's club!"

"Can I speak with Toni please?"

"Who?"

"Toni Martin, the manager."

"Aye, Toni, hang on, I'll just get her."

I waited patiently; Isobel was bursting at the seams, shaking me excitedly and acting like a jack-in-the-box within the small space we were crammed into. These boxes were built for one.

I heard a melodic, "Hello," come through the receiver.

"Toni? It's Shona." There was a silence on the other end, I was looking helplessly at Isobel, I didn't know what else to say. Isobel took charge and grabbed the phone from my weak grasp.

"Is this Toni?" There was a pause, "I'm Isobel, Shona's sister." Another pause, "Well no, nothing is wrong, yet...Shona is about to tell my father she isn't going to do anything he asks anymore and then she is heading straight back for the city...Okay, I'll put her on."

"Hello," I was glaring at my sister; I couldn't believe she did that...well actually I could, especially after the last twenty-four hours.

"Shona, what do you need?" You, I wanted to reply. "Do you need me to come get you?"

"No! No, I can catch the ferry tomorrow then get the coach to the city. I'll arrive back around 10:00pm. I don't have anywhere to stay."

"No problem, come straight to the club, if you're late I'll wait for you. I'll sort something out."

"Oh, Toni, thank you, thank you so much."

"Are you sure you don't need me to come up there? I can get someone to cover my shifts tomorrow."

"No really, I'll be alright."

"Call if you need me, you have my home number right?"

"Yes...Toni?"

"Uhuh."

"I'll see you tomorrow." I added tentatively.

"Yes, you will," was her firm reply.

I hung up and let out a deep breath.

"She offered to come and get you didn't she?" I nodded, "I knew it!"

"I declined, I can make my own way back, but I'll need a lift to the ferry."

"Billie!" We both exclaimed at once.

We headed back to the house, both of us dizzy with excitement and fear. Entering back into our home was like a splash of cold water being thrown onto my face.

"Where have you two been?" My father demanded.

"We went for a walk, Father." Isobel replied meekly, using the exact tone that my father would find acceptable. It worked like a charm.

After dinner, we took another short walk, allowing us the privacy to finalise our plan.

Billie had very kindly agreed to pick me up tomorrow morning and drop me off at the harbour. I would be gone before my father knew anything about my sudden departure - in theory. It was the coward's way out. I would tell my mother after my father left for work.

Isobel helped me pack my bags for my return. We would store them under my bed out of sight until tomorrow.

"I couldn't have done this without you, Isobel. I don't know how to thank you enough."

"All you have to do is live your life for you, the way you want to live it. That's all the thanks I will ever need."

"We won't lose touch ever, and when you leave here we can meet up regularly. You'll let me know the minute you find out where you're going to be studying?"

"I promise you, I will. And you have to keep me up to date on how things are going with Toni. I can't wait to hear more about that."

"Tell me again, I'm doing the right thing."

"You are, Shona. You *are* doing the right thing." Isobel said it with such conviction I believed her. I was just second-guessing myself; I knew deep down it was right.

I hardly slept at all that night. I kept tossing and turning, worrying over my decision. Eventually I heard my mother and father get up around 5:00am, he always set out early. My mother would start her day with him, making his breakfast. I heard him leave the house and drive off on his tractor. I would be gone before he returned. I closed my eyes, taking some comfort from that thought. I still couldn't relax. I doubted I would be able to do that until I was with Toni.

After breakfast I helped my mother to clean the kitchen while my sisters made the beds and swept the house. I took the opportunity to speak to my mother about my plans that day.

"I'm leaving today, Mum, I'm going back to the city."

"Oh, has something happened?"

"Yes and no." I paused, trying to remain composed. "That is to say, nothing has happened in the city that's forcing me to return. I just can't do it, Mother, I can't give in to his wishes and demands any longer."

I bit my lip as tears sprang to my eyes. I wanted my mother to understand, I desperately wanted her blessing, I could go on without it, but it would mean a lot to me.

"I was young once too, Shona, I know what it is to have hopes and dreams. I never had the opportunities you girls are carving out for yourselves. I doubt I even had the presence of mind to work out how it could be done. Instead, I married young, your father was the first one to ask and I accepted. I had dreams of becoming an artist, I love the scenery around here, and I have always wanted to paint it. I told your father once and he said it was a silly notion. Instead, I should concentrate on the important duties of being a wife and mother, and I did. It's only recently that I have come to realise that I gave in too easily. I could be painting now, I should be painting now." She stressed. "I would still be a good wife and mother.... and you know what, Shona? I'm going to paint, come hell or high water, I'm going to do it."

I smiled; I was heartened to hear my mother speak this way.

"It occurred to me recently, that had I painted all those years ago, you girls may not be in the bind you are right now. No one has ever said no to him, he has come to expect that as the norm. I've raised good intelligent girls, now I want you to be good intelligent, independent girls. Go paint, Shona. That will make me happy."

I knew my mother was speaking metaphorically. What she said made perfect sense to me. "I'm sorry I'm leaving you to face his wrath after I'm gone."

"Whether you tell him face to face, or I tell him, he will deal with it the same way. He will continue on, but you will no longer exist for him, at least outwardly; he won't discuss you, he won't acknowledge you, inside, who knows? At least this way, he won't put you down before you leave. You don't deserve that, none of you do."

I hugged her fiercely. "Thank you, thank you, Mum. You have no idea how much this means to me."

"I think I do, and you have no need to thank me. I'm your mother, I just wish, I had offered encouragement the last time instead of censure. For that I'm truly sorry."

"I love you, Mum, I love you so much." The tears sprang to my eyes. I would really miss her, probably now more than ever.

"I love you too, Shona, I'm proud of who you are and I know you will be successful in the future."

We both stood in the kitchen for a long time, crying and holding each other. We didn't stop until my sisters joined us after finishing their chores.

"So it's true, Shona? You're really going to do it?" my youngest sister Moira asked. She was only thirteen and looked a lot like my mother with her long auburn hair and hazel coloured eyes.

We hadn't spoken of this at all, Moira hadn't acted any differently around me, but clearly my decisions mattered to her also.

"Yes, Moira, I am. I'm leaving shortly."

"Good for you. I wasn't sure if I could believe Isobel when she told me. She's always teasing, I thought it was another of her pranks." She favoured Isobel with a look of mild exasperation.

"I wouldn't tease about that Mo, it's too important for all of us." Isobel declared haughtily, we both gave her a dubious look.

"Promise you will write often," Moira pleaded.

"I will, same as always. I promise. I'll come back and visit too, even if it means I have to stand outside the gate. I'll come back to see you, Mo."

Moira hugged me, "I really miss having you home, Shona."

"I know, I miss you too, but there will come a time when we can all do anything we want. Meet up with each other anywhere we want, you'll see. I know it seems like forever now, but it's not, I promise you." We hugged a little longer. I really was going to miss my little sister more than ever.

I hugged Isobel next. "I love you, Izzie, don't you ever go changing on me. I'm so proud to call you my sister."

"You never know, come next year we might even end up living in the same city."

"Don't go scaring me."

"Did you just make a joke, Shona? Quick, Mum, mark it on the calendar?"

We all laughed and it felt wonderful and sad all at the same time

Chapter 10

I stood at the bow of the boat, looking forward for the first time, instead of back towards the island. I put on my Walkman and the sound of Madonna's *Live To Tell* filled my ears. I was free and it felt fantastic. I could live with the knowledge of my father not wanting to know me. He couldn't stop me going back to the island to visit. I would stay at the hotel if I had too. I was excited about seeing Toni later. I had called her knowing she would make everything right. I didn't know where I would be staying, but I felt safe in the knowledge that Toni would have it sorted out. I was extremely fortunate to have a friend like her. She was a godsend.

As I settled into a seat near the back of the bus for the long coach journey ahead, I wondered where I would end up working for the rest of the summer. Having given up my job at the bar, I would have to act quickly to find something. There was also the issue of where I would live for the duration of my second year at university. I doubted the room at Hannah's father's flat would still be available. Finding a place to rent could prove to be difficult this late in the summer. Most students organised their accommodation prior to the end of the academic year. I would worry about that later, at that moment I was so tired I just wanted to close my eyes and sleep.

I had made great time getting into the city centre and then catching a local bus out to Portobello. I lifted my bags from the baggage hold as the maroon and white double Decker approached my stop. I was feeling extremely nervous again. I shouldered one bag and carried the other as I made my way down the main street towards the seafront. It was 9:45pm and still light. It must have been a warm day in the city as I could still feel some heat radiating from the sandstone buildings in the gently cooling night air. I stood outside the double doors of the *Railwaymen's club* and took a deep breath before opening them. Inside the air held its usual mix of stale cigarettes and alcohol. I walked towards the door of the bar knowing Toni would be on the other side and knocked gently.

Toni opened the door with a smile and I felt myself smiling in return. She ushered me behind the bar, opening the door wide.

"Go put your bags in the cupboard, I'll be with you in a minute."

I did as she said, glad to be able to take the weight from my shoulder, I turned to find Toni standing in the doorway. She took one long stride and enfolded me in her arms.

"I missed you! I missed you so much," Toni said without reservation.

"I missed you too...I," about to say more, we were interrupted by the sound of an empty pint glass being tapped on the bar. A sure sign someone wanted a drink. Toni chuckled and released me.

"Welcome back." She mocked, while rolling her eyes, alluding to the nature of bar work.

Toni was finished thirty minutes later. That was the good thing about a Monday night, the bar closed at 10:30pm.

"Well, I'm glad that's over," Toni said wearily.

"Yeah." That was all I could find to say. We had reached an awkward moment and neither of us knew quite how to proceed.

"I'm assuming that you still don't have anywhere to stay?"

"Yes, that is, I mean no, I don't have anywhere to stay."

"It was short notice, but I do have a couple of options for you. For as long as you need them."

"Okay." Now it was Toni's turn to hesitate.

"Ah, well Cath offered to put you up for a little while. She has a couple of kids, but they are both young and you could share a room with them for a while."

She paused briefly, "...And ah, the other option is my place."

Quickly continuing with, "I'm not expecting anything from you, Shona, and I would understand fully if you wouldn't feel comfortable at my flat. That's why I asked Cath, I don't want you to feel like I'm pressuring you..."

"I don't, Toni, really. And if it's all right with you, I would like to stay at your place. I really like Cath, but in truth, I would feel a lot more comfortable with you."

"Great, that's great. Come on then, let's get you settled."

Fifteen minutes later, Toni parked, rather expertly, outside an old tenement building. She lived just outside the city boundary, in a small fishing village called Musselburgh, which was only a short drive from the club. We took a bag each and made our way up the stairwell to the fourth floor of the tenement building.

The flat was small, but I immediately liked it. Toni explained that there was only one bedroom, before hastening to add there was a sofa bed in the living room, which I could use. I think we

both found the situation a little awkward, but we got through it without any misunderstandings. Toni was being so careful to ensure I knew her intentions remained honourable. I flashed back to having Billie grope me on a first date and appreciated her efforts all the more. The truth was, had she kissed me, I think I would have kissed her back.

"Is that all the stuff you have?" Toni gestured towards my two bags.

"No, it's not. I left all my books and some clothes at Mrs. Ramsay's."

"We could pick them up tomorrow if you like, and maybe have some lunch somewhere?"

I was really appreciating Toni's efforts to help me get settled and organised. She was being so kind and thoughtful.

"That sounds great. Thank you, Toni, for everything."

She gave me one of her brilliant smiles adding, "You're welcome," before showing me a cupboard in the hall, which contained spare bedding. Toni demonstrated how the sofa bed operated, and then we made the bed together. "You know where the bathroom and kitchen are; help yourself to anything you need and I'll see you in the morning."

"Night, Toni."

"Goodnight, Shona, sleep well."

I did, I slept really well. Better than I had in some time. After breakfast we headed to Mrs. Ramsay's. Toni insisted on accompanying me inside to help me pack up my belongings. She had picked up a couple of cardboard boxes from a local shopkeeper to put my stuff in. Mrs. Ramsay was shocked to see me. I had travelled faster than the Royal Mail, so she had no idea I was leaving for good. I introduced Toni with one breath, then apologised for my sudden departure on the next. Within fifteen minutes we had everything boxed and ready to go. I thanked Mrs. Ramsay for her hospitality on the way out and she offered me a terse goodbye. Toni made a face and said something, which was only for Mrs. Ramsay's ears on the way out. Whatever it was certainly seemed to change her attitude, as she became very civil to me and wished me well. When I asked Toni later, she would only say that no one was perfect, and Mrs. Ramsay had her skeletons to hide like everyone else.

We returned to Toni's flat to drop off my belongings. I certainly felt the impact on my lungs of the four flights of stairs, especially trying to keep up with Toni.

"You get used to the stairs after a while," she mentioned, noticing my plight.

"I'm sure you do, but I thought I was in pretty good shape." I huffed.

"You are, that is, I mean..." She gestured at my body with her hand.

"It's alright, Toni, I know what you mean. I swim to keep in shape."

"And it works. I run, I think that's why I handled the stairs better, running is probably a bit more aerobic, you know, fitness being environmental. If we did something in water, I bet you would be better at it." Toni rolled her eyes, shaking her head at letting her mouth run off. It was so unlike her, she was normally much more self-assured. I took a little piece of comfort from knowing she was affected by the situation too.

"What I mean to say is, you would perform better at a task in the water."

"I don't know about that," I mumbled. We both looked at each other, there was a tension between us, one that had existed before I left, but it seemed to have increased exponentially since my return.

"Shona, can we talk?" Toni asked sounding a little exasperated.

"Sure." I know it didn't sound as casual as I tried to make it.

Toni gestured towards the sofa. I sat down and, nervously clasped my fingers together. I didn't really want to have any kind of talk. Thoughts and possibilities were racing through my head. Did Toni no longer think of me that way? She had said after I kissed her that if she thought I was ready she would be willing to have a relationship with me, didn't she? I'm sure I couldn't get that wrong. Maybe she had met someone while I was away? I had, after all, told her there couldn't be an 'us'.

Damn! I had been so stupid, thinking I could return and just pick up where I left off. Why should Toni put her life on hold for me?

"Please don't be nervous?" Toni requested.

"It's hard not to be right now." I answered honestly.

Toni nodded and motioned for me to take her hand then suddenly withdrew, unsure of her actions. I hated that. I didn't want us to be so uncertain around each other. I took Toni's hand in mine anyway, feeling unnaturally bold. Her hand was warm to the touch and it soothed my frayed nerves a little.

"I don't want to push you into anything, Shona, I never would, but I have to admit, it's hard being around you...I'm very attracted to you, but I never want to make you nervous or afraid of me. That would be too painful. I don't want to put you in a difficult position."

I nodded in understanding.

"If you being here causes you to feel any pressure, I would prefer that you moved somewhere else, somewhere you can be more comfortable."

I think I fell for Toni even more after hearing those words. I felt the urge to hug her for being so thoughtful. Her honesty deserved to be reciprocated with my own.

"The reason I'm nervous has nothing to do with being afraid of you, Toni, nothing at all. When you said you wanted to talk, I thought that you might have found someone, or that maybe you didn't feel anything for me anymore."

"Far from it. I was miserable when you left, Shona. Ask Eddie; he kept telling me I was going to drive away customers. Then he thought it was great when they cleared out quicker at the end of the night to avoid getting the brunt of my frustration. All I had to do was glare and they were grabbing their jackets. He said it was my fault Archie left his walking stick behind, he was in such a rush to leave, the poor man forgot he had a limp."

We both laughed. Eddie was so funny; I had missed his great sense of humour.

"I would like to try and find out what there is between us, that's the real reason why I called you. It's also the reason why I went running home after university finished for the summer. I was so scared, Toni. I still am, but never of you. I'm scared of what I feel. It's all so new to me, but I don't want to run anymore. My sister..."

"Isobel, the phone terrorist?" Toni pretended to be terrified. I appreciated her attempts to keep things relaxed despite the tension surrounding us.

I laughed, "Yes, that's her. She helped me to come to terms with what was really motivating my actions. She was fantastic, Toni. Well, that and a few other things actually."

"I can imagine, quite a take charge kind of girl?"

"You have no idea, I now know more about Isobel than I ever wanted to, but that's a story for another time.

Toni was laughing, "I can't wait. She sounded like a right bossy little madam on the phone."

After a few moments of basking in the comfort of being around one another again, I decided to ask the big question.

"Where do we go from here?"

She thought for a moment before answering. "Why don't we take things slowly? Go out on dates, generally have fun and enjoy each other's company. Things can happen at a pace that you're comfortable with, Shona. Then if a time comes when we are both ready to move our relationship to another level, we can explore that avenue together."

Toni was saying all the right things and I had no doubts that she meant what she said, but I was concerned that she would be sacrificing too much.

"What about the things you want, Toni? Won't you be sacrificing a lot to allow me so much time?"

Toni smiled her wonderful smile. "It's true that I'm ready for a physical relationship. I won't lie about that. The thing is, Shona, I want to be sharing this journey with you. The stages we move through and the joy it could bring. I truly believe it will be worth every cold shower I take.

The thought that I could cause Toni to take cold showers left me feeling immensely pleased with myself.

"Don't be so smug and yes, I know you won't ask, but you're curious. I've already started my cold showers." Toni laughed at my wide-eyed expression, she was as bad as my sister.

"Lunch?" I nodded my acceptance as she continued to chuckle.

We went to a small Bistro on the waterfront. It had a terrific fresh seafood menu. We sat at a table outside making use of every ray of sunshine we could bag. It was after all at a premium in Scotland

"I haven't mentioned this yet, but your old job will soon be available." Toni said casually.

"Couldn't you get anyone since I left?" I felt terrible, imagining the extra work that would have caused for the bar staff.

"Yes, I hired a young guy who is going into his final year at school. He answered the ad and did a half-decent job. He finishes up in three weeks when school re-starts. You really have no need to wash glasses though; you could work behind any bar serving drinks and getting better pay."

"I could, couldn't I," I smiled at Toni. I felt quite pleased about that. "But I don't want to..."

Toni put her knife and fork down and said earnestly, "Shona..."

"No, let me finish Toni, please?" Toni nodded. "I know I could work somewhere else, but I really enjoy working at the club. I know it sounds crazy, but I miss it. I want my old job back, if you'll let me?"

Toni smiled, "Of course I will. I have to tell you, Cath and Eddie will be delighted to have you back, as am I. The entire weekend goes a lot more smoothly when we have you working with us." She returned to attacking her salmon with gusto.

"Great, I'm going to have to try and find another job during the week though or I'm going to be bored and penniless. Which is a very bad combination"

"Eddie and Cath have summer holidays coming up. How would you feel about standing in for them behind the bar?"

"I would love to!"

"I thought you might. Eddie starts a week's holiday on Monday, his brother is home on leave from the army and he wants to spend time with him. Then Cath is on holiday for two weeks after Eddie returns. She is off to sunny Spain with her family. I'll sort out some shifts for you starting next Monday. You will be working on your own sometimes but don't worry, I'll show you all you need to know on Monday night."

Chapter 11

I was delighted to be getting my old job back. Toni was right, I could go work somewhere else, but I had really come to like the club. The bar staff were great and I had got to know a lot of the customers and there were some real characters among them, before I left for the summer I could hardly walk along Portobello high street without being stopped several times for a chat with patrons of the club.

I had come back to spend time with Toni and that certainly wasn't going to be a problem now. Between working at the bar and staying in her flat, we might end up sick of the sight of each other.

I really wanted to make the most of the next few weeks. I would be back at university soon enough, which would mean a lot of my time would be taken up with lectures and study. Between that and working all weekend, my time alone with Toni would be in short supply. I wanted to enjoy what was left of the summer.

The issue of my accommodation was also unresolved. It was very kind of Toni to allow me to sleep on her sofa, but I needed to find a more permanent solution to my living arrangements. I would have to start searching the local newspaper ads to try to find something both suitable, and within my budget.

The following day, Toni was working two shifts at the club. She had left just after 10:00am to open up for 11:00am. She said she would be home around 5:00pm, for some dinner, and then back to the club to open up for 6:30pm. Wednesdays were bingo nights and I knew it was a busy time for her. I decided to spend my day exploring the local shops near Toni's flat, and then I

would prepare some dinner for us, as a surprise for her. I didn't know any fancy recipes but my mother had taught me the basics well. Cooking was something I enjoyed, very much.

Toni arrived home just before 5:00 pm her timing was impeccable.

"Something smells fantastic!" she declared as she walked into the kitchen. I was instantly pleased, I just hoped she would be as enthusiastic after she tasted it. Toni glanced over at the small kitchen table, which had been set for two.

"You've been busy," she remarked, raising an eyebrow.

I blushed, "I hope you're hungry?"

"I'm starving! I usually just manage to fit in some beans on toast between shifts. What a surprise."

I decided right then, I would gladly cook for Toni anytime just to get her to smile like that. She looked so beautiful.

"I made some chicken stew," I told her as I opened the oven door and used the mitts to remove the casserole dish. I placed the dish onto a hot plate and proceeded to serve the stew.

"Shona, this looks fantastic! Really." I sat down and waited anxiously for Toni to take her first bite.

"Mmmm.... oh, wow. I haven't tasted anything this good in so long. It's delicious," she mumbled around a mouthful of hot food.

"Really?" I had hoped, but I worried she was just being polite.

"Absolutely, I hardly ever cook for myself and even when I do, it never tastes as good as this."

We ate in silence for the next few minutes, Toni really was hungry and she did genuinely appear to be enjoying my cooking. I was quietly pleased, a half smile I was unable to smother, testament to that. Inside though, I was absolutely chuffed to bits.

"I'm so touched by your thoughtfulness, Shona, I don't know what to say, but thank you. I really wish I had more time to spend with you, enjoying your fantastic cooking, and the rest of the evening, but I have to grab a quick shower and change before I head back to work." Toni looked very apologetic.

"It's alright, I understand." I did really, but I also wished Toni could stay. I cleaned up the kitchen as she dashed off to get ready.

Twenty minutes later, her hair still damp from her shower, Toni popped back into the room.

"I'm heading back to work now..."

I nodded, "I'll see you tomorrow then?" I asked hopefully.

"About tomorrow, would you like to do something? Maybe head to the Funfair?" Toni looked almost shy. I thought I must have been imagining that.

"I would love to, I've never been to one." I replied enthusiastically.

"Great..." Toni lingered for just a moment. "I'll...I better get going." She grabbed her car keys from the table.

"Thanks for dinner." Toni added, giving me a quick hug, which I welcomed, smelling her coconut shampoo and another light fragrance.

Toni touched my cheek lightly. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I nodded, "Tomorrow, looking forward to it." I watched Toni hurry out of the front door. I went into the living room and sat down on the sofa to replay the last few moments in my head. I was sure that Toni had intended to kiss me, but she had pulled back. She did as she had promised she would, and was letting me set the pace and direction of our relationship. I wondered what I would be feeling had Toni gone with her initial impulse. I'm sure I would have enjoyed kissing her, but I wondered how I would have felt afterwards and what about tomorrow? Had Toni asked me on a date, or was it just a fun thing to do as friends? Boy, this relationship stuff was tough.

I looked around Toni's sitting room noting the differences from the one back home. The furniture was much more modern and the floor was carpeted, but the main difference was that Toni had a television and a stereo. All we had back home was a radio. I had watched a little television at my grandparent's on occasion, and we sometimes had a need for television in school with the educational programmes, but it was still a bit of a novelty for me. I switched it on and it buzzed into life.

Chapter 12

Edinburgh was enjoying its third consecutive day of sunshine - Toni and I were both dressed in shorts and vests for our day at the *Funfair*. I had initially opted for a dress, which Toni thought looked lovely, but pointed out it may not be the best attire for a visit to the fun park. I flushed pink then quickly changed into an outfit similar to Toni's. We parked in the car park at the back of the *Railwaymen's Club*; Toni said the good weather would mean all the surrounding car parking spaces would likely be occupied. It was only a ten-minute stroll along the promenade to the fun park. As was typical of Scotland, the beach was full of sunbathers, and most would have

been pasty white when they woke up that morning. They were now looking like lobsters. My fellow countrymen had the same attitude towards sunshine as a starving man being introduced to a feast, and I was no exception. I glanced at Toni taking in her long legs. It was the first time I had seen them out of trousers. The skirt at weekend rule for the club never applied to Toni, she instead wore dress trousers. I had often wondered what her legs would look like. I had initially glanced to see if they were tanned, but couldn't help examining them further. They were lean and well toned from her running. Toni would be tall in anyone's book, but in a country like Scotland she was almost unusually tall for a woman. It looked like her legs were the cause of her extra inches. I lingered longer, noticing her skin was a light olive colour, the type that would tan easily. I raised my eyes, eventually, back to Toni's to find her peering at me over the top of her sunglasses, a knowing grin on her face. I had a sudden need to look out towards the water suddenly feeling like taking a refreshing dip. Hoo boy was it hot today!

We walked through the Fun Park entrance, in truth I was really quite excited, I hadn't been to a proper *Funfair* before. The place was just a hive of activity and noise. Every ride we walked past had a different upbeat song playing from the booth. I could feel the energy pulsing through me.

"What do you want to do first?" Toni asked, as she looked around.

"I don't know." I was wide eyed at all the different rides available.

"Is there anything you have always wanted to try?"

"The Dodgems?" I asked hopefully.

Toni grinned and grasped my wrist, gently pulling me in the direction of the cars.

"You want to share, or get your own car?"

"Share." I said decisively.

You know it's at times like this when I really questioned my ability to ever lose my naivety. I had just made two mistakes, the first was suggesting the Dodgems, or as Toni referred to them, the *Bumper cars*. The second was deciding to be her passenger. I soon found out that the minute Toni gets behind the wheel of any vehicle, no one is safe from the risk-taking maniac she becomes!

She went after everyone, women, children and grown men with gleeful abandonment. Ramming into their cars before speeding off after her next victim as soon as the first was left stranded against the side of the rink.

Toni laughed in triumph as her victim's cars had to be pushed back into the main part of the rink to get them going again. The guy in charge kept shouting at her to behave, but she just waved at him and carried on regardless.

Her attitude was contagious; she seemed to have an effect on everyone behind a wheel. It kind of

turned into a free for-all, with everyone looking for a victim!

"I can't believe you did that!" I stated attempting to admonish her.

"The whole point of the Fun Park is to have fun. There's no fun to be had in driving around in a circle being polite," Toni replied showing absolutely no remorse whatsoever.

"Toni, I don't think they're going to let you back on the Dodgems."

"Sure they will." Smiling confidently she asked, "What's next?" while rubbing her hands together.

I decided then and there that my choices would be governed by where Toni could do the least damage and not get into trouble.

"What about the Waltzers?" I asked hopefully.

Her eyes lit up. "I love the Waltzers. C'mon."

We waited on the outer edges for the current ride to finish. I was enjoying listening to the music. The Waltzers seemed to be a favourite hang out place for people around my age. I could see why, the music was great and you were able to lean on the outside of the structure chatting with friends. The ride stopped and Toni headed towards an empty car. We waited for one of the guys to take our money as we listened to the last strains of an Erasure song. Toni paid a guy and whispered something to him. He smiled and then a few moments later the ride started up slowly as the sound of *Funky Town* boomed out of the speakers.

The Waltzers quickly got up to full speed and then the guy returned, he smiled at Toni and asked me if I was ready? I nodded vigorously and the next thing I knew we were spinning rapidly, gravity pushing us into the back of the seat. I knew I was screaming, but I didn't care, it was such a rush. As the car slowed a bit from the spinning Toni grinned at me.

"You want to have more fun?"

I nodded. I was hooked. "Yes!"

"Just copy me."

Before I had time to ask, Toni had flipped her long legs over the back of the seat, in the reverse of how we should be sitting. I looked down into her grinning face."

"Are you serious?" I shouted over the din.

"Yes! C'mon, try it." She motioned for me to mimic her position.

I quickly copied her and found myself looking at the world upside down, then in the next breath

we were spinning madly and it was crazy. We screamed and laughed at each other, just having a blast. When the ride finished my legs were like jelly. I grabbed onto the rail to steady myself. Toni put a hand on my back to assist.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes! That was amazing!"

"Come on, I'll win you a teddy." She grinned that infectious grin and I was ready to follow her anywhere, knowing it would be fun.

We walked over to the stalls that lined the wall of the Fun Park. The vendors were all trying to tempt us to try their stall. Toni stopped in front of one that had air rifles. The object was to shoot down the five little figures and win a prize.

Toni paid the stall-holder and he put five pellets into a small tray on the counter which had the air rifles chained and bolted to it. At least no one was going to be accidentally shot, well except maybe the vendor. Toni looked at the pellets and beckoned the guy back over.

"Can you swap these two pellets please?"

"Why?" The guy scowled.

"Because these two are made of tin, not lead," Toni replied reasonably.

The guy looked really mad. "They're all the same," He said a little forcefully.

"Is that right? Well, I suppose I could hang around your stall a little longer, see if anyone else gets tin instead of lead." Toni offered.

The guy changed his attitude after that. "You know, I don't know how that could have happened. Let me replace those two pellets for you."

Toni gave him a charming smile, and proceeded to fire the rifle and hit all five figures. I picked a really cute looking teddy bear.

Afterwards we took a break and went for a hamburger. "It's lucky you spotted those tin pellets, Toni. I wonder how they got there?" I was truly puzzled.

Toni smiled at me, "Everyone gets two tin pellets, Shona, that way no-one ever wins the big prizes."

I opened my mouth, but found I was at a loss for words. Toni gently closed it putting a finger under my chin. "Don't worry about it. Not everyone is as honest or trusting as yourself."

"I know, but sometimes I feel so stupid." I knew I sounded downbeat. I had taken to referring to

times like this as my 'chookter' moments.

"Listen, I grew up here at the seaside, surrounded by pubs and the Funfair. Making money is the name of the game; unfortunately it's not always made honestly. Some people will do anything to ensure they make money. Here they rig equipment, in the pubs they change the brands of the alcohol, or serve a smaller measure than advertised. You are like a breath of fresh air around here, Shona. I would far rather you stayed exactly the same, than become even remotely like them."

I nodded. Sometimes it was like stepping into a whole other world in more ways than one.

"Ready for some candy floss?" Toni asked.

My enthusiasm returned; I loved the sugary treat. Toni had once again managed to lift my spirits.

The rest of the day was fantastic. We won more cuddly toys, went on the Dodgems again and then tried the Big Wheel, which was a bit hairy. Vertigo was not my friend. My stomach lurched perilously, every time the wheel descended.

At my insistence we had even gone on the Ghost Train. Toni had begged me to reconsider, she said only the kids went on it cause it was the lamest Ghost Train ever, but when I said please, she relented. I was glad she changed her mind. We sat together and held hands; it may have been the least scary Ghost Train ever, but it was my favourite ride that night.

Chapter 13

I found the weekend went pretty slowly after our fun day out. Toni was working almost constantly. She worked Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings as well as both the Friday and Sunday early shifts. I hardly saw her, which meant I had too much time to myself.

There was only so much I could do in the flat, without encroaching on Toni's personal space. The living room, bathroom and kitchen were sparkling. I cleaned the inside of the windows and Toni's part of the stairwell.

Toni had said, I didn't need to do any chores, but in truth I was glad for the distraction. We were getting on really well. Too well in fact, if such a thing were possible. I was scared to take the next step, the difference being this time, I really wanted to. I just had to find the courage. It would be a lot easier if Toni would just kiss me, but I knew after the chat we had she wouldn't do that. Why couldn't life be simple?

Monday night saw me back at the club for the first time. This was to be my training night, where Toni would teach me the things I would have to be able to do when I was on my own. Lesson one was changing a barrel, a very important chore Toni said. Having the beer and lager on draught at all times was crucial. The other important chore was locking up. Everything else could wait.

"If it isn't Snip and Snap." Eddie said in a loud cheery voice.

Toni glowered at him. "What's this, a busman's holiday?"

Eddie continued to keep his grin plastered to his face. He gestured to the young man with him, "Toni, you remember my brother Andrew? Andrew, you remember Toni, and this is Shona, she's been working here for a few months now."

Andrew nodded to Toni, "Nice to see you again, Toni," He turned a toothy smile on me, "Hi there." Andrew's eyes travelled over my body, I was more attuned to this look after working here the many months. My father had been right about that. Men did ogle me. I felt a little self-conscious under his intense gaze. Toni broke the moment by asking him what he wanted to drink. As Toni poured their drinks, Andrew brought his attention back to me.

"Has Eddie been treating you well here, Shona, because if not I can have a word with him?" He winked at me.

Andrew was nothing like Eddie. Where Eddie was tall and lean, Andrew was shorter with a much stockier build. "Eddie treats me very well, he has lovely manners. It's great working with him." I replied.

"Yeah, he's a good guy, I feel sorry for him though. It's got to be tough having a better looking younger brother, eh?" Andrew threw me another wink and a smile. I heard Toni grunt something as she waited for the second pint glass to fill with lager. Eddie was busy trying his luck, putting some money in the bandit

I wasn't sure what to say in reply, I had never really considered Eddie in terms of looks. He always dressed well, wearing neatly pressed shirts and trousers, even when it wasn't the weekend. And his hair was always nicely styled too, but I wasn't about to choose one brother over the other. I didn't want to encourage Andrew in any way.

"Ack, I'm only pulling your leg, Shona. That's a lovely accent you have by the way, I could listen to you talk all night."

"Uh, thank you."

I was glad when Toni put the two drinks in front of Andrew, I was sure I didn't imagine the slight thump they made when they contacted the counter, or the smile that didn't reach Toni's eyes.

"There you go, Andrew, on the house. Your brother's waiting at the pool table, enjoy your

game."

As she turned away from the bar, Toni made a face and rolled her eyes, "Cocky wee sod, thinks he can charm the pants off any woman he meets."

I grinned at her, inordinately pleased with her small show of jealousy.

"So, what did Eddie mean when he said Snip and Snap?"

"Oh, that...nothing, just Eddie thinking he's funny." Toni quickly dismissed the question, but I took the opportunity to ask more generally about the names he gave to people.

"He has nicknames for a lot of people, can you tell me where they came from?"

Toni pursed her lips, "Okay. Who do you want to know?"

"Lets start with Sinky."

"That's easy, his surname is Sinclair."

"Makes sense. What about Popeye?"

Toni laughed, "Have you ever noticed how his right eye looks kind of glazed?"

I nodded.

"It's made of glass...one night he fiddled with it and it popped right into his pint of beer."

"No!" I squealed, "I don't believe you."

"That's what they say." She shrugged.

"Alright, I'm afraid to ask, but you call Pete, bum flesh?"

"Ha, ha, another easy one. His surname is Erskine."

I had a blank look on my face. I just didn't get it.

"You know, erse being slang for arse?"

"Oh - yes! That's funny." I laughed. I hoped Pete wouldn't mind.

"What about my nickname? I know I must have one."

Toni made a face. "Island Girl."

"Eddie came up with that? Not very original, I quite like the song."

"So do I."

We both smiled.

"Hmmm, lets see who else? Well Betty Beehive I can work out for myself, but what about Barry, he gets called Snake?"

Toni's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure you want to know this one?" I nodded in the affirmative.

Toni extended her hands about twelve inches apart. "He is a well endowed guy."

My eyes widened in shock. Toni winked, "Just remember not to stare at his crotch the next time he's here."

"You know, I always wondered what the attraction between Barry and Val could be, but now..."

"Shona!" Toni scalded in a mock school teacher voice, "I'm shocked at your assumption...however, you're not wrong and Val was my source." She winked.

"Okay, one more. What about Snip?"

"Right that's it, games over." Toni waved a hand in the air, indicating she was serious.

"You're no fun." I pouted.

Toni stopped and gave me an intense look. "Trust me, I can be lots of fun."

She delivered the line in a voice that made me blush furiously, whilst sending a shiver through my body.

Chapter 14

I had spent the early shift on Tuesday alone in the bar and it had gone well.

Today was Wednesday, bingo night. Toni and I would be working both shifts, as she had to take deliveries from the brewery that morning, I would work the bar. Right now she was off to do the banking. The bar was very quiet, so I decided to take the opportunity to pop to the cellar to refill the ice bucket.

I called to the two guys currently in the small hall playing dominoes, to let them know. I always

tried to make these trips quick, I still hadn't been able to get over the spooky feeling I got from the cellar.

I was using the scoop to ladle the ice into the bucket when I heard the door open. I didn't turn, expecting it to be Toni.

"Hey sexy, you fancy a quickie?" The voice was female, but unfamiliar. I turned so quickly from the ice machine that the cubes scattered over the concrete floor.

"Christ! Who are you?" The owner of the voice yelled.

I glared at the stranger. I wasn't good with guessing ages, but she looked to be in her thirties. She had long blonde hair and was dressed in a short skirt, with a fitted blouse. She wore high heels and make-up. Her lipstick was a ruby red. I don't know why I immediately took in all these details. Perhaps it was because this woman intimidated me.
I finally found my voice.

"You shouldn't be in this part of the bar."

"I was looking for Toni. One of the guys in the bar said she was down here, I assumed he meant Toni, not you."

"She's gone to the bank, and should be back shortly. Can I ask you to please return to the hall?" I had said this with a degree of venom in my voice. It was partly due to the fright this woman had given me, but mostly to do with her suggestion to Toni.

"My aren't you a feisty wee thing." She gave me a smirk, which I didn't appreciate one bit. I wasn't sure where all my animosity was coming from, but I continued to glare at her.

"Alright, keep your knickers on, I'm leaving." She turned to go and I followed her as she walked back towards the bar. She was heading for the exit when, just as she was about to leave, Toni entered the bar.

"Oh, hi, Carol. What brings you here?"

"Just popping in to see how my favourite barmaid is doing."

"Sure you were. What are you after?"

"First, can you call off your Rottweiler?"

"What did you do, Carol?" I could tell from the question that Toni was familiar with Carol's behaviour.

The woman was the picture of innocence. "Me? I only went looking for you in the cellar, where I might add; I got the fright of my life. I was then ordered out of the area by this young thing."

She pointed at me, while looking at Toni, clearly expecting some kind of action from her.

Toni sighed. "Carol, meet Shona. Shona, this is Carol. She is the owner of *The Flying Dutchman*, the bar down on the corner.

I nodded my recognition of the place. I had always thought it had such an interesting name.

"I've told Carol *not* to just walk behind *my* bar acting like she owns the place, but she never listens." Toni turned to Carol, "Maybe you will after today?" she asked hopefully.

Carol shrugged. "I'm all out of *Glenfiddich*, someone messed up the order. Can you loan me a couple of bottles?"

As she asked, I was certain I saw her batting her eyelids.

"Carol, *you* are the only one in your bar that does the ordering, but yes, I can loan you some. One week, that's all you have to return it. If not I'll be down the road and behind *your* bar to take it back."

"Promises, promises."

Toni went to the store cupboard and returned with the bottles. "One week. I mean it."

Carol accepted the bottles from Toni. "Nice meeting you, Shona."

I knew she didn't mean a word of it. She turned back to Toni, "Walk me out?"

She was looking at Toni, the same way Eddie's brother had looked at me and I was shocked by the sudden urge I had to scratch her eyes out.

I had promised myself to try to handle my feelings better and to stop trying to run from them. I knew this one. It was most certainly jealousy. Reverend Halliday said that to be jealous, was to be controlled by our own desires and that was not a good thing. Right now I was thinking it was a very good thing. I didn't want that woman anywhere near Toni!

I was quiet for the rest of the afternoon. Toni had driven us home after our shift so we could shower, change and grab a bite to eat before the evening one began.

I couldn't stop thinking about what Carol had said when she opened the door to the cellar. Had something happened between her and Toni? I was still on the naive side, but I knew exactly what Carol had meant.

Perhaps she was just teasing? But then there was the way she had looked at Toni in the bar. I was

so confused.

That night behind the bar followed a similar pattern to the way the afternoon had ended. I was still pretty quiet, but I kept myself busy in the small hall while the bingo was being called.

I was, in reality, avoiding having a conversation with Toni about what had happened with Carol that afternoon. I thought if I wasn't around she couldn't ask me what was wrong. Then I wouldn't have to tell her how upset I was, or ask any of the questions I had running around in my head. Toni had made no secret of the fact that she dated. I really had to let this go.

By the end of the night I was feeling no less miserable. Several customers had told me to "*cheer up*" which wasn't very helpful to say the least. When we were finally able to shut the bar down and finish clearing up, Toni turned to look at me and I knew the question was coming.

"You want to tell me what's wrong?" she asked in a patient tone.

"Not really." It was the truth.

Toni sighed, "Shona, if this has something to do with us, which I think it has, it's important that we try and discuss it. If we don't, it could become a bigger problem."

"It's Carol." I blurted.

"What did she do?" Toni seemed a little angry. "Did she say something?"

I shook my head, "No, well not to me. It was something she said to you."

Toni looked confused, "Tell me? If you don't, I won't be able to help."

I couldn't look at Toni; it was too difficult. She lifted my chin, so that she could look into my eyes. "Please, tell me?"

"She thought it was you in the cellar." Toni nodded for me to continue, but I couldn't repeat the words Carol had used.

"It's alright, Shona, I can pretty much guess what she said. What I can tell you is that there has never been anything between Carol and I. She flirts terribly with me, she always has. She has a husband, not that it would stop her, but more importantly, I'm not attracted to her." Toni spoke very deliberately.

I nodded, I believed Toni, but I still didn't like Carol.

"The thing is, Shona, although what I'm telling you is true, I do have a past. I have ex girlfriends and we might bump into them. A couple of them occasionally pop into the bar. What I can tell you is, they aren't anything like Carol." Toni smiled and she got what she was after, I smiled

back.

She bumped my shoulder with hers, "Want to go for a walk, it's a nice night?"

"I'd like that."

We walked down to the beach, where we removed our socks and trainers and strolled along the water's edge, enjoying the cool air. It made a welcome change from the smoky atmosphere of the bar.

Toni reached for my hand and I welcomed hers into mine.

"You know there used to be a chain pier here. Like the ones in Blackpool and Brighton." Toni broke the silence with her information.

"Do you remember it?" I asked curiously.

She chuckled, "No, it was demolished in 1917."

"Oh, what a pity."

We stopped at one of the wooden barriers that lined the beach every few hundred yards.

Toni leaned back against it and I didn't hesitate to move into her arms. Welcoming the embrace wholeheartedly.

My heart was beating wildly as I attempted to gather up my courage and kiss her. I *really* wanted to kiss her. I had never wanted anything so much in my life.

I slowly tilted my head up towards Toni's and there she was, waiting for me.

It was all the encouragement I needed.

As my lips touched hers I knew...this time I wouldn't run away.

Toni's kiss was tender and gentle, so different from any other I had shared.

Her lips were so soft and warm and when her tongue caressed my lips, it was a gentle request for entrance, no pressure or force behind it. I opened my mouth and welcomed her.

I had never experienced anything so wonderful. No feeling of invasion here. I felt her tongue

caress me, then retreat, urging me to follow and then, before I was really even aware of what I was doing, I was inside *her* mouth, tasting and teasing.

I felt like I was in a dream, time really did seem to slow down during that kiss. Then we were breaking apart, gasping for air. I held onto Toni tightly, I wasn't even aware of when I let go my trainers and socks to hold her. I buried my face into her shirt and she held me close, caressing my back and placing soft kisses in my hair. We kissed again and again. I couldn't get enough of this newfound pleasure. Eventually it was Toni, who called a stop to our make out session.

"Much though I hate to stop this wonderful activity, I think we'd better head back."

She smiled and started to lead the way back up the beach after we picked up our shoes. It was only when we broke apart that I started to realise just how cold it was.

We hurried to the car and Toni started the engine to drive us to her flat. I just couldn't keep the grin off my face. My smile was so wide I was sure my cheeks would hurt tomorrow. I was happy, really happy, for the first time since arriving in this city.

We drove back in silence to Toni's flat. I could still feel my lips tingling from the kisses we had shared. I kept stealing glances over at Toni, as she focussed on the road ahead. We stopped at a red light and she turned to me and smiled. I wanted to lean over and kiss her again. As Toni parked her car on the street, I suddenly became nervous as I began to think of what would happen next. We were going to be alone in her flat together. I wanted to kiss her some more, but I was uncertain. Afraid of where it might lead.

As Toni opened her front door, I headed straight for the living room and began to unfold the sofa bed. I wasn't sure how I should act now so I fell back on routine. I glanced up to see Toni standing in the doorway smiling softly at me.

"Can I come in?" she asked quietly.

"I uhm, sure." I was so nervous.

"Shona..." Toni took my hands in her larger ones and held them gently. "I had a wonderful time tonight and I hope you did too?"

I nodded vigorously. I really had enjoyed this evening. She pulled me into her arms and I buried my face into her neck.

"I meant what I said, Shona. I won't try to push you to do anything you don't feel ready for."

I nodded again, "Thank you." I whispered.

Toni pulled back and looked into my eyes. "No. Thank you." She smiled, "Can I have a goodnight kiss?"

The kiss was gentle and soothing, it calmed my nerves and left me feeling much more settled. As we said our goodnights a part of me longed to be close to Toni for the rest of it.

As I lay in bed waiting for sleep to come that night, I couldn't keep the smile from my face or my stomach from fluttering every time I thought of the kisses we had shared. I couldn't wait to write to Isobel and tell her all about this new development. Most of all, I marvelled at how wonderful Toni had been. She was very in tune with my thoughts and feelings. Whenever I was having difficulties or became uncertain she was constantly able to put my mind at ease. With each passing day she was becoming more important to me. My doubts seemed to be gradually disappearing one by one with the help of Toni's patience and gentle reassurances.

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~ Licit Cusp ~

by weebod

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FEEDBACK: If you enjoy the story please let me know: weebod@mac.com

Part Three:

Chapter 15

After that first kiss it seemed that Toni and myself couldn't find more than fifteen minutes to spend together. With Eddie being on holiday, we were both working the weekend behind the bar. It was all we could do on the Saturday to fit in meals between shifts, let alone anything else.

On Sunday afternoon I found myself alone in the flat lamenting Toni's absence. I was sitting on the floor browsing her record collection when the sudden ringing of the phone interrupted my self-absorbed thoughts.

"Hello?"

"Shona?"

"Isobel! I can't believe it's you." I had never before had the opportunity to talk over the telephone with my sister. In the letter I had sent just a few days ago, I included Toni's home number as well

as the number for the club.

"I want details, Shona! Your letter only hinted at something happening."

"I know, I was afraid to say anything more as I feared father might read it."

"Yes, well I can understand that. So come on, stop holding out on me!"

I could imagine Isobel standing in the phone box bouncing with excitement, I feared a little of her was rubbing off on me as I had the wicked thought of prolonging her agony.

"I kissed Toni." I almost whispered.

I heard a scream on the other end of the phone. *"I'm so proud of you, Shona, I worried that you might never find the guts to do it. So, what was it like?"*

"It was..." I stopped momentarily lost for words; I wasn't comfortable discussing this aspect of my life. All things related to sex and romance were alien to me. I finally managed to find the courage to voice my feelings about the kiss that I had shared with Toni. "Oh, Isobel, it was amazing. I never knew I could feel so much from just a kiss."

"Ohh, my sister is a romantic! I always suspected that you would be. So have you had sex yet?"

"Isobel!" I chastised, she could be so blunt at times.

"What? I told you, Shona, this is the biggest news to hit this boring Island in forever. Tell me everything."

She was also prone to exaggeration. "Alright." I knew she wouldn't give up until I gave her the details. "Toni has been nothing but patient with me. She won't push me to do anything I'm not ready for, but she has been very open and honest with me, Isobel. I know she would never try and take advantage of me."

"Oh, Lord! She must be crazy. Does she realise how long she could be waiting for you to take that step? Shona, you have to take the bull by the horns, you can't do this to the poor woman."

"I don't know, Isobel, the thought terrifies me."

"It's just sex, Shona! You don't want to be a virgin forever. Sleep with Toni, if you love her you could never regret it."

Isobel's words gave me pause for thought. Did I love Toni? I hadn't considered that before. These were uncharted waters for me. I had never felt like this about anyone, could it be love?

"Shona? Are you still there?"

"Yes. Sorry, I was thinking about what you just said."

"About sleeping with Toni?"

Did she have to sound so enthusiastic about me losing my virginity? "Yes, I mean no. I was thinking about what you said...about love."

Isobel's voice took on a reverent quality as she spoke her next words. *"Do you love her?"*

"I...I don't know. I want to be with her and I know I care deeply about her. She makes me laugh. I feel safe when I'm around her, having her in my life makes me feel happy. I can't imagine not having her in my life. She means so much to me."

"Oh, Shona, that really sounds like love to me. I'm thrilled for you, I really am. Toni sounds like a really special person."

"She is, Isobel, she really is."

At work that Sunday evening it was difficult to stay focussed. My mind kept returning to the conversation that I'd had that afternoon with Isobel. My thoughts constantly drifting to Toni and the possibility that what I felt was love. Isobel seemed sure it was but everything was so new to me, I was uncertain regarding the true depth of my feelings.

"Shona?"

I was pulled out of my daydream when Toni called my name, while simultaneously shutting of the lager tap. I glanced down at the pint in my hand and noticed that it was already full. I had been so deep in thought that the lager had been spilling over into the drip tray.

Toni gave me a concerned look, "Is everything alright?"

I blushed, in part at my lack of concentration and also at the nature of the thoughts I had been having about the woman standing next to me. I nodded to Toni that I was fine, not trusting my voice at that moment. I spent the rest of the evening trying extra hard to stay focussed.

When the shift was over, Toni drove us home. We were both a little quiet on the short trip back. In the flat Toni made us some tea and served it with biscuits. We sat on the sofa listening to Simple Minds while sipping the hot beverage and munching on our chocolate digestives. Toni put her socked feet on the coffee table to rest her weary legs. I quickly followed her example.

"What a weekend, huh?" Toni finally broke the silence.

"Yes, it was hectic. I'm not used to working days and nights, I don't know how you do it."

"You get used to it. When you work full time in a bar, you get used to having little to no social life over the weekend." Toni looked at me, "it's been tough being around you all weekend but not having any time alone together."

"I feel the same," I admitted shyly.

Toni leaned towards me slowly, looking for any sign of hesitancy on my part. There was none and I willingly met her lips. It had been too long since our last kiss, and we broke apart too soon for my liking.

"You want to tell me what had you so distracted tonight?" Toni enquired, as she sipped her tea.

I felt myself blush and quickly looked down at my lap. I wasn't yet sure whether I loved Toni, so I couldn't reveal the real reason for my lack of focus.

"It was just something Isobel mentioned this afternoon in our telephone call."

"Ah, sister stuff is it? Must have been really interesting judging by the colour in your cheeks."

I knew Toni was teasing me and sure enough when I looked up at her she had that little half smile on her face, with a raised eyebrow for added effect.

"A girl's entitled to some secrets, Shona, I was just a little worried about you."

Toni yawned, "guess it's time for bed, I'm back in tomorrow morning. You have any plans for tomorrow?"

"Well I'm going flat hunting, that will probably take up most of my day. I have a couple of appointments set up to view properties." I was also going to be doing a little shopping in the hope of finding a suitable gift for Toni's upcoming birthday. Cath had mentioned it to me in passing, but Toni had said nothing.

"You know you can stay here as long as you need to?"

I didn't doubt the sincerity of Toni's words, but I couldn't help feeling concern that I was intruding upon her. "I know. I just don't want to overstay my welcome."

"Trust me, that could never happen," Toni replied in a serious manner. She kissed me softly on the lips then wished me goodnight.

"You're spoiling me, Shona, what am I going to do when you find a flat for rent? I'll have to go back to beans on toast!"

I had cooked for Toni again. I really enjoyed doing it, especially on the days when she worked both shifts at the club.

"Speaking about that, did you have any success today?"

I shook my head, my good mood deflating as the memories from that afternoon returned. "No, I couldn't find anything suitable. One of the flats I knew was wrong almost immediately. It was three guys and I just didn't feel comfortable around them and that was before I saw the pyramid made from beer cans and the assortment of road signs and traffic cones scattered around the sitting room. I'm not sure it would have been a good place to get some quiet time to study. I think the three of them did a lot more drinking than studying. The second flat was a mess. Half the kitchen ceiling was missing due to a leak. The wallpaper was peeling in the sitting room. There was damp in the bedroom that would be mine, I could go on. I'm sorry it's taking so long, I'm sure I'll find something soon."

"Don't worry about it. Take all the time you need. I mean that."

"Thanks. You've been so good to me, I don't know what I would have done without you these last few weeks."

"You don't need to thank me. I love having you around."

We both sat at the small kitchen table staring at each other. Toni seemed to be considering something, I wasn't sure what. The moment passed and she stood up and began to clear dinner dishes from the table.

"Well, I'd better get moving or I'm going to be late. You coming with me?"

"Of course. I really enjoy our Monday nights."

"Me too."

That night was a little busier than usual. It was the turn of the *Railwaymen's Club* to host the domino league, which meant more customers and more noise from the clatter of the dominoes

being mixed at the various tables. I helped Toni out occasionally when the bar got busy and we chatted in the quieter spells.

"I have all of Thursday off, now that Eddie is back at work. I was thinking we could spend the day together. Maybe go to the pictures and then have a meal?"

"Oh, that sounds wonderful." I was delighted with Toni's suggestions. We had only been on one date and it had been such good fun, I was looking forward to more.

"Are there any movies that you want to see?"

I looked at Toni blankly. I had absolutely no idea what films were showing. "I've never been to a cinema before. At home on the island, we only have the mobile cinema and my father never allows us to go."

"You have never been to the cinema?" Toni asked, clearly aghast at the idea.

"No."

Glancing towards the back of the bar, a frown marring her lovely face, Toni asked, "You don't have a television either, do you?"

I shook my head.

She looked back at me, "You know you can watch T.V in the flat whenever you like?"

I smiled. "Actually, I have been watching some. I like a show called *Eastenders*, which is about people in London. I love the accents, and there is an Australian one too, called *Neighbours*." In truth, I had become quite hooked in the short time I had been watching them, eager to find out what would happen in the next episode.

Toni laughed. "You like the soaps!" she declared.

"Soaps?" I quizzed.

"Yes - sorry, soap is short for soap opera. It's a term used for an ongoing fictional T.V show."

"Why?"

Toni considered that. "Good question."

She reached for a large, thick yellow book that was lying flat on the bottom shelf where there was a ledger and a telephone book. I watched intently as she flicked through the pages, noticing it was an encyclopaedia.

"Ah - here we are. 'Soap Opera refers to their origins as radio broadcasts in which various soap

manufacturers were the shows sponsors. Programmes were broadcast in weekday, daytime slots when mostly housewives would be available to listen, thus the shows were aimed at a predominantly female audience.' That would explain the soap adverts then." Toni added.

"Fascinating." I loved gleaned new information and was pleased Toni had taken the time to answer my questions.

"There you go - you learn something new everyday." Toni closed the book and returned it to the bottom shelf, "Do you have any preference for the type of movie you would like to see?"

"No, I really have no idea."

"What about a comedy? There's a film called *Crocodile Dundee*, it's supposed to be really funny."

"That sounds good." I would have gone to see anything Toni suggested just for the opportunity to spend more time with her. My week was looking a lot brighter now that I had a day with Toni to look forward to.

Toni walked to the cupboard in the bar. "Shona, can you come in here a moment?"

I followed Toni into the cupboard where she promptly pulled me into a warm hug.

"I had to do this, you just look so adorable," she whispered in my ear.

I snuggled up to her, sharing her warmth, I decided I wanted to do more than cuddle, so I kissed Toni's neck, which made her shudder. I tried it again just to make sure it was my actions that caused her response.

Toni captured my lips and we were kissing passionately within moments. I'm not sure how long we stood in the cupboard, but I had completely forgotten where we were until I heard the familiar sound of a pint glass being put on the bar. I tried to break the kiss to allow Toni to go and serve the thirsty customer, but she immediately captured my lips again.

"Ton...."

"Shhh, I don't want to stop just yet. They might go away."

She started to kiss me again and this time I went with it. We heard the glass being thumped down again with the clearing of a throat. We broke apart giggling.

"Is anyone there?"

Toni put her finger to her lips gesturing for me to keep quiet. I was trying so hard not to laugh my body was shaking. She tiptoed out of the cupboard then walked towards the back of the bar where I washed the glasses. She then strode back again towards the main part of the bar. I

wondered what she was up to.

"Ah, Bert, what can I get you?"

"I've been standing here for ten minutes." I heard Bert complain. It was a blatant exaggeration. He was one of the committee members and the more I was around these men, the more I realised how difficult they could be.

"Pint of export? Yes, sorry about that, Bert, I was out the back taking care of something."

I watched from the cupboard as Toni calmly poured Bert's pint then took his money.

"Are you feeling alright, Toni? You look a little flushed."

I let out a snort from the cupboard when I heard Bert express concern for Toni's wellbeing.

"Oh, I'm good. I was just rushing about back there."

Toni walked back to the cupboard when Bert left the bar and gave me a menacing look. "You are in so much trouble," she growled.

I let out a yelp as Toni tickled me, and then we both burst out laughing at our own antics.

Chapter 16

Thursday couldn't come quickly enough for me. I had spent a lot of the last three days debating what to wear. I was really excited about my second date with Toni. The plan was to travel into the city centre to see the movie then we would come back to the flat and get ready for the restaurant, which was within walking distance. I had made up my mind on my wardrobe the night before. I would dress casually for the pictures then wear the dress Toni said I looked lovely in for the meal. I thought it was strange that I could spend so much time with Toni both in the flat and at work, yet could be so nervous about a date.

Toni drove to the cinema, which was very near the university, I had passed the building many times, but never been inside. We got our tickets some popcorn and Coca-Cola's, and then headed in to watch the movie.

It was quite empty due to it being an afternoon showing. We chose seats in the middle of the cinema to watch the film. The screen was giant sized and the sound incredible. I had never imagined how different it would be from sitting watching television. The experience was so much more enhanced in the cinema.

Toni held my hand throughout the movie, no one noticed since the place was dark. The film was

really good. Very funny at times and it was romantic.

Afterwards we headed back to the flat to get ready for the evening. It was at these times in particular that I noticed the lack of space in the flat. It was fine for one person, but when two people were trying to get showered and dressed while trying not to invade the others privacy it became very apparent that the flat was not made for two people to exist in this way. I was really encroaching on Toni's space, despite what she said and would be making a bigger effort to find my own place and get out from under her feet. Not that I minded seeing them, I had been taking enormous pleasure from watching Toni wander around her flat barefoot, listening to her favourite music.

The walk to the restaurant was pleasant. Toni was wearing a pair of navy dress trousers and a white cotton shirt with the collar up. It was a fashionable look, I had never worn my shirt collar up, but it was a look Toni chose often. I had been tremendously pleased when Toni again commented on my dress saying that after she had suggested I not wear it to the funfair, she really hoped to see me in it again.

Toni ordered a bottle of wine with the meal, I wasn't even aware that she drank alcohol. I had never seen her drink before. When I commented about it, she explained that when she is driving she doesn't bother to drink any alcohol at all. When the wine arrived the waiter poured some into Toni's glass then gestured with the bottle towards mine. I hesitated briefly before nodding my assent. I had never tried alcohol of any kind before, but tonight I intended to rectify that.

"Will you tell me about your family?" I asked Toni, I was curious since she had never mentioned them before.

"I have a brother and my dad is a train driver."

"Really? Does he ever drink at the club?" I wondered if I might have met him.

Toni nodded, "Yes, often." She looked pensive, "Look I haven't mentioned this before to you because I was pretty embarrassed I suppose, but you should know that Keith is my dad."

I'm sure the look on my face must have been pretty comical. I just couldn't imagine Keith being Toni's dad. I was utterly shocked.

"I know it's hard to believe. Look, I'm really sorry that he grabbed you, Shona. He really is harmless; he just gets carried away when he drinks too much. Which I have to add is more of a problem since we lost my mum a few years ago. He's always sober at work, but when he is off, he just goes on one of his binges."

"I'm really surprised to hear that Keith is your father, I just can't see it."

"Trust me it's true," Toni said wryly.

"What happened to your mum, if you don't mind me asking?"

Toni immediately looked sad. She swirled the wine around her glass, looking pensively at the liquid before settling her moist eyes on me. "She had breast cancer." She stated softly. "I still miss her, we all do. My brother and my dad really struggled to cope with her loss. I did too, but they both seemed to find her passing extra hard to accept. I don't know why that was, perhaps I just got some genes that made it easier for me to hold it together. Ross went into a downward spiral, I tried to help him, but at the time there was just no reaching him. He was in his final year at school and applying for university. He wanted to be an engineer. He quit school and did whatever he felt like, which was anything from alcohol to solvent abuse. You know glue sniffing, inhaling lighter fuel, that kind of thing. He got into petty crime, mainly house burglary and shoplifting, to support himself. Had a couple of short stints in prison but it was never a deterrent. With no job and little to no chance of getting one he turned to crime again. He robbed a shopkeeper at knifepoint, was caught and this time the judge showed no leniency at his trial, which I agreed with. He was getting more out of control. The judge sentenced him to five years in prison. He will be up for parole in a year. I've visited him often and he does appear to be more positive about life. I think he might make it this time around. I've seen him mature while in prison, he has been studying and generally putting his time to good use. I really hope he can get his life back together."

"I'm really sorry about your mum's passing and the problems your dad and brother have experienced as a result of her loss."

"Thanks." Toni smiled at me, but she looked so sad, "Now you know why I haven't mentioned my family." She blew out a breath. "I'm sorry this is supposed to be a date. I don't mean to sound so depressing."

"You're not. I really want to know all about you and what matters to you."

"You matter to me." Toni held my gaze making sure I really understood the seriousness of her statement. The moment ended with me blushing profusely, and Toni smiling at my predicament. This was becoming a habit!

"You look adorable when you blush."

"You seem to have a habit of inducing this reaction in me."

"Good. I like it."

I knew I was blushing harder and Toni decided to show me some mercy by changing the subject.

"How is the wine?"

"Mm, good. I really enjoy the taste." Toni picked up the bottle and offered to refill my glass, which I merrily accepted. She then topped up her own glass.

"You should be careful since this is your first taste of alcohol, it can really go to your head." Toni warned. I just waved my hand and told her I would be fine. She chuckled, at my antics. If I had still been in possession of my powers of observation, I would have noticed the early warning signs. I was already a little drunk.

After the meal, we walked back to the flat, well Toni told me later that I may have thought I'd been walking, but in reality I had needed to lean on her to even keep in a straight line. I do recall giggling a lot. My memory of that walk seems to have me more floating along than leaning, I think I prefer my version to Toni's.

When we got to the flat I immediately seemed to lose all sense of propriety, not to mention all my sexual inhibitions. Toni had barely had time to close the door behind us when I pounced on her lips. I recall kissing her passionately and my hands seemed to be taking on a mind of their own.

"Shona, we have to slow down," she protested.

"No, I don't want to." I continued my exploration of Toni with renewed enthusiasm.

"Please, Shona?"

Had I been sober, I would have noticed that Toni's voice sounded strained, but due to my alcohol addled haze I didn't pay any attention to her protests, instead attempting to manoeuvre us into Toni's bedroom. I got us inside the door and Toni was still saying something, but my mind was fully focused elsewhere. I had decided I was ready to make love.

Toni wrapped her arms firmly around me and pulled me tightly to her, effectively trapping me.

"Shona, listen to me. We have to stop."

"But I don't want to. I'm ready. I want to do this."

"And so do I, desperately, but I don't want you to have any regrets."

"I won't, I promise you." I attempted to kiss her again.

"Shona..." Toni seemed to groan out my name. "Listen to me. I can't take that risk. The last thing I want is for you to wake up tomorrow and regret anything we do. You had wine tonight for the first time and though I'm loving your enthusiasm, I can't take advantage of it."

I went limp in Toni's arms and she released her hold on me. I recall slumping down onto the side of her bed and crying.

"You don't want me," I sniffed.

"Of course I do," Toni assured me. "I want you more than anything, but I can't take advantage of your disposition. Please, Shona, if you were sober we wouldn't even be having this conversation. We would be sharing my bed."

I sniffed and nodded my head. Toni lay down on the bed and pulled me down beside her. The last thing I remember is her holding me in her arms and whispering soothing words to me. I drifted off to sleep with her comforting voice and the warmth from her body both acting in tandem to lull me into slumber.

I woke up in a strange room, on a strange bed, fully clothed and alone. I couldn't recall immediately how I got there and then the memories of the night before started to come to me in bits and pieces. I was at once both mortified and grateful that Toni had remained sensible the night before. I turned my head into her pillow and groaned aloud.

"Morning sleepy head."

I couldn't look at her after my wanton actions the night before. I had thrown myself at Toni.

"Morning," I managed to mumble into the pillow.

"How's the head?"

I took a moment to consider the question. My head felt fine, I was a little tired though, and my mouth - it was so dry and what was that taste? Ewww!

"It's good thanks."

I felt the mattress dip as Toni sat on the bed beside me. She put her hand on my shoulder.

"Are you going to look at me?"

"No," I whined.

"Come on, look at me," she encouraged.

I gave a slight shake of my head, indicating my reluctance. I knew I was being a coward, but I was so deeply embarrassed about my actions the night before.

"You have to face me sometime, might as well get it over with," Toni teased lightly.

I turned my head slowly to the left and peered up at Toni with one eye. She pulled a funny face at me and I ended up laughing. With the tension broken, I was able to turn and fully face Toni.

"See, it's not so bad." She ruffled my sleep-tousled hair.

"I'm sorry about last night." I really did feel very ashamed.

"Don't be sorry. You have nothing to apologise for."

"Then I want to thank you for keeping a sensible head, when I was clearly not thinking straight." I considered what I had just said. It wasn't all that I wanted to say. "I really do want to make love with you Toni, but you were right. I would far rather be sober, but not because I might regret my actions the next morning."

Toni looked at me curiously and waited for me to continue.

"I want to be sober because then I will be able to remember our first time together with absolute clarity." I paused for a moment considering my next words before giving voice to them. "I think I acted the way I did because I am afraid that you may get fed up waiting for me to make the next move." That had been worrying me since my chat with Isobel.

"I don't want you to feel any pressure to sleep with me, Shona. You take all the time you need. I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

Toni leaned over and placed a light kiss on my lips. I had managed to find the correct words to say what I felt and be honest with Toni. I was beginning to fully understand the merits of talking any issues through with her. She had once again been able to put me at ease. I was beginning to wonder what I had done to deserve such a wonderful person in my life. Toni was thoughtful, caring, patient and understanding. I suddenly wondered how any of her previous girlfriends could have let her go. I also vowed to myself never to act upon Isobel's advice while drunk!

Chapter 17

The following Wednesday I found myself working with Eddie for the bingo night. Toni had the night off to attend a friend's Birthday party. She said she had wanted to invite me along but with Cath being on holiday that only left Eddie to tend the bar. I was pleased with the knowledge that Toni had wanted to take me, even if I couldn't actually go.

Eddie was hilarious to work with. He was charming to the ladies then would say something completely funny about them after they went back to their seats. Tonight he was dressed as smartly as always in a pair of neatly pressed dark grey pin-tucked dress trousers, with a slim leather belt. His mint coloured shirt, also crease free, had the collar open and the cuffs turned up twice. He reminded me of the character in *Eastenders*, Simon Wicks, especially when he ran a hand through his hair, repositioning the 'flick' that was styled into it. His aftershave smelled nice too.

"Hello, Myra, might I say you're looking lovely this evening."

This woman scared me. She always wore a scowl on her face. I couldn't believe Eddie had just said that to her.

"Don't get fresh with me son, I'm old enough to be your mother. I'll have a brandy."

Eddie sniffed the air around Myra, "Is that a new perfume you've been getting yourself?"

"Away with ye, ya daft edjit!" Myra declared while swatting at him.

"You smell lovely, Myra." He grinned at her, oozing charm. My gran would say that Eddie was a silver-tongued devil.

I couldn't believe the woman actually smiled a little. I had never seen anything but a scowl on her face. I had once heard Eddie claim that she must have been chewing a wasp to perfect her look.

"Get off with ye and get me my brandy." She was totally flustered due to Eddie's attentions.

He winked at her and I swear she blushed. I loved working with Toni, but Eddie was a close second because he was just so much fun.

As the ladies settled down for the second half of the bingo night, Eddie and I chatted quietly behind the bar. I saw an opportunity and decided to seize it with both hands.

"Eddie, what did Toni do before she worked here?" I enquired casually.

"She started here straight from school."

"Oh, I heard her mention college, do you know what she studied?" I feigned indifference, but Eddie saw straight through my facade.

He got a big grin on his face. "She won't tell you will she?"

"No," I answered with a little exasperation in my voice. "Why won't she tell me? What could be so bad?"

"Aww, I wish I could tell you, Shona, but it's more than my life's worth. If I told you she would make my life here miserable."

"Please?" I gave him my most innocent look.

Eddie started laughing then abruptly stopped as he was hushed by some of the bingo players. He continued on in a lower voice.

"Shona, it's a long time since you had that look on your face. Now you're trying to use it to extort information from me. You've come a long way from the naïve girl that walked through these doors nearly a year ago."

I was extremely pleased about that, even though I wasn't getting the information I wanted.

"You'll find out Toni's secret in good time. It'll all come out in the wash." Eddie walked away laughing to himself, which just made me more curious than ever.

That weekend behind the bar had a kind of strange atmosphere to it. Toni seemed to be glowering at Eddie. He was walking around with a smirk on his face. I knew something was up, but I just didn't have a clue what it was. More than once that evening I caught them whispering to each other in dark corners, only catching snippets of their conversation it was hard to piece it together. There was something about a date and Toni stating *"All right! I'll do it"* After that the conversation between them stopped, but not the dirty looks Toni cast at Eddie, or the smug look he taunted her with. It was very intriguing. At one point I remarked to Toni that Eddie had a really sharp wit to which she sarcastically replied, *"Oh, aye. So sharp he just might cut himself...with any luck!"*

In the next couple of weeks, Toni and I had been on two more dates, one to the ice-rink and another to the zoo. Cath was back from holiday and I was back washing glasses. I still giggled every time I thought back to the Saturday night when Cath came rushing into the bar late. She was looking very healthy, with a lovely tan and wearing a gorgeous red jacket. I was behind the bar helping Toni and Eddie serve customers, since there was little else to do till the glasses emptied. Before Cath had a chance to explain why she was late, Eddie turned to Toni and said, *"Oh, Toni, I forgot to tell you Cath is late because she was arrested for disturbing the peace."* Cath looked at Eddie as though he had lost his mind, while Toni and I stopped serving to listen. *"Aye, she was arrested because her jacket was too loud."* Eddie walked off, his shoulders shaking, with Cath following him and beating him over the head with her clutch bag, calling him a cheeky git. Eddie and I grinned at them, it was so very funny and great to have everyone back behind the bar, but as the night wore on and I was once again by myself out the back, I found myself envying the other three bar staff.

When the weekend was over I found that for the first time, I was unhappy at my job. I really missed working behind the bar and serving customers. I was once again feeling detached from everyone else. Now the feeling was even stronger since I knew you could have fun while you worked behind the bar. I felt even more isolated and lonely as I took on the demanding work of washing the glasses again.

On Monday night I was as usual spending my evening with Toni while she worked.

"You were miserable weren't you?"

Toni didn't have to clarify what I was miserable about and there was no way I could deny it. I had been in a funk for the last couple of days.

I sighed, "Yes. I was."

"I thought that might happen. Shona, have you thought about working somewhere else? I could ask around, there are lots of pubs around here looking for experienced bar staff."

"I don't know, Toni, I would miss you guys."

"But I can't give you any hours behind the bar now that everyone is back from holidays. You're back washing glasses which is hard work for low pay, not to mention a lot less fun."

"I'm not sure." The truth was I didn't know if I could cope with working somewhere else. I was really comfortable in these surroundings. It would be difficult to go somewhere else. I would also see a lot less of Toni.

"Think about it. Let me know if you change your mind."

The following days were a little lonely for me. With no bar work to fill my week anymore, I was left with a lot of free time on my hands. I didn't want to turn up at work with Toni all the time. I wanted to keep saving money, but without work during the week I wouldn't be able to do that. I decided by Friday to take Toni up on her suggestion to work in another bar.

When Toni returned home for dinner that evening I told her of my decision.

"I think you're doing the right thing, Shona," she said around a mouthful of spaghetti bolognese. My cooking repertoire had been improving over the weeks. "I already know of a couple of places looking for staff. I know the pubs and they aren't too bad for trouble. I'll take you to see them tomorrow."

"Thanks...Uhm, you already started looking for me didn't you?" I accused gently.

Toni grinned, "Yes, I ah... I was hoping you would decide to do what was best for you and not what was best for the club."

I nodded, "You're right. I didn't want to leave you guys without a glass washer, but I also have

concerns about working somewhere else."

"You'll do great, trust me I know these things. And don't worry about us. I'll get someone to fill the job."

And that was that. By Saturday afternoon, I had a new job working behind the bar of a pub called *The Fern*. It wasn't too far from the *Railwaymen's club*, only about a five-minute walk. Sunday was my last night at the club and I was a little sad to be leaving. At the end of the night Cath and Eddie stayed behind a little longer and had a couple of drinks to celebrate my new job. I stayed away from alcohol and stuck to softies after the last time. I still cringed at the memories I had of me throwing myself at Toni.

Chapter 18

The Fern was a lovely little pub. As with the *Railwaymen's Club*, it had a friendly atmosphere and the staff, were being helpful and accommodating to me. The one notable difference was the interaction between the staff and customers. Where as at the *Railwaymen's*, many of the customers had a lot to say about the running of the club and were almost territorial about it, here in *The Fern* there was a more reserved, but polite interaction between the staff and patrons. Much more laid back. I was enjoying this new experience even after only a few days.

The major draw back was seeing less of Toni. She would drop me off if we were both on an early shift but regardless of what evening shift Toni was on she insisted on picking me up at night. I told her I didn't mind getting a staff taxi, but she wouldn't take no for an answer, finally saying, "*Will you please just humour me?*"

Things were working out well, however I was still left with the problem of finding new accommodation and I still hadn't found a suitable birthday present for Toni. Now that I was pretty much working full time, it was more difficult to find time to go flat hunting and to fit in shopping.

I mentioned this one afternoon to Marie who worked behind the bar at *The Fern*. She told me about a jewellery shop nearby that specialised in unusual pieces, so I decided to take the bus into work early on Friday to have a look. I was there for mere minutes when my eyes fell upon the perfect gift. I enquired about the engraving service and paid for my purchase, which I would be picking up tomorrow. I just knew it was the right thing, but it wouldn't stop me worrying over it for the next three days. Toni hadn't said a word about her Birthday, so she clearly had no plans to celebrate it. That meant she would be working as usual in the club. I was working the early shift on Monday but, unlike the club, *The Fern* didn't close from 4pm till 6.30pm. When I finished my shift at 6.30pm, I would walk down to the club and spend the evening with Toni.

After finishing my shift at *The Fern*, I popped into a local café to get some dinner. I ate my cheeseburger and chips, and walked down to the club. I really couldn't wait to see Toni and spend a few hours with her, even if she was working, but decided not to let on that I knew it was her birthday until we got back home tonight. Though we had managed to fit in a couple of dates recently to the zoo and the ice-rink. I think Toni was determined to introduce me to as many new experiences as possible, and while I thoroughly enjoyed both outings, I had particularly fond memories of the walk we had taken last week. The weather was pleasant, and Toni suggested we get out for a while before she was due back at work. We took the short walk into the centre of Musselburgh, where we went to *Luca's* ice cream shop. Toni assured me that warm sunny days and a *Luca's* ice cream, were what summer was all about. After we got our cones we made our way leisurely back towards the harbour. It was a perfect afternoon; there was hardly a cloud in the sky as we watched the boats on the river forth, while children played in the sand, soaking up what would probably be the last of the good weather.

I practically burst through the doors of the *Railwaymen's club* in my enthusiasm to see Toni. I tapped lightly on the bar door before entering. Spotting her leaning against the closed side of the bar reading a magazine, I unceremoniously grabbed her arm and pulled her to the back of the bar for a deep kiss.

"Wow! Now that's a great hello."

"I missed you, I feel like I've hardly seen you," I said beseechingly.

"Mmm, I know. I've missed you too." Toni lifted me with little effort and sat me on top of the low counter where the dirty glasses were stacked at weekends. We continued to kiss enthusiastically for several minutes until being rudely interrupted by someone knocking at the bar door. Well I considered it to be a rude interruption, but I suppose Toni *was* working!

Toni groaned, "I better go see who wants me." She gave me a parting kiss on the lips then walked back through to the bar.

I decided to wait for Toni where I was. I heard her open the door then greet her dad. Well she called him Keith, which was a little strange to me. I wondered if it was just here in the club that Toni used her dad's first name. I heard Toni thank Keith, then stop at the cupboard before making her way back to me.

"Now, where were we?" she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

"Right here," I replied as I invited Toni back to the spot she had just vacated, so she once again stood between my legs as I sat on the counter top. It was a bold decision for me, and I felt decidedly decadent for having made it.

After a few more kisses I decided to ask a question that had been nagging away at the back of my mind ever since Toni had told me Keith was her father, "Why do you call your dad Keith?"

"Hmm, dunno," Toni shrugged. "I've called him Keith for as long as I can remember."

"Isn't that a little odd?"

"Not to me, but I can understand why other people would think so." Toni thought about it, "I don't have any other answer, Keith never seemed bothered by it, so there was no reason to stop."

We broke apart when we heard the bar door open. Toni looked through to see who it was. I could tell by the way her eyes narrowed she wasn't pleased to see them "Be right back," she whispered, then walked through the bar to greet them. I listened in shamelessly to the conversation.

"Can I help you, Henry?" I immediately detected an edge to Toni's voice.

"I just thought I would take a look at the back, get a feel for the place."

"I thought you already did that yesterday?"

"Aye well, I fancied another look." I had no idea who Henry was but his tone held a note of challenge, I wondered why he would talk to Toni that way.

"You know, you will only be working three nights at the weekend. That doesn't permit you to wander in and out of the bar as you please."

"Why no'? Everybody else who works the bar can."

"You, Henry; do not work the bar. You clean glasses on the weekend, what possible reason could you have to be behind here at any other time?"

"There's no need to be like that, Toni!" The man sounded like a petulant child that had just been told off.

"I'll see you Friday, 7pm sharp." Toni waited for him to exit the bar before returning to me, "Bloody pain in the arse!" Toni stood with a hand on her hip and a scowl marring her beautiful face. She let out a slow breath to calm herself.

"That was Henry, the new glass washer." She pointed in the direction she had just come from.

I was a little confused as to why Toni had employed him if he was going to be trouble.

"When did you hire him?"

Toni snorted, "That's just the problem, I didn't hire him." She shook her head, "He's the brother of one of the committee members, when I said I would be looking for a new glass washer, he

mentioned how his brother had lost his job and could do with the extra cash. He isn't even through the books, he claims his dole money and gets cash in the hand here."

"Isn't that illegal?" I may not have known a lot about it, but even I was pretty sure that claiming social security money from the government while working was against the rules.

"Uhuh, but that's the committee at their best. Henry's brother gets a favour, and I have absolutely no say in the matter."

"That stinks." I wasn't quite sure where that declaration had come from, but it certainly felt appropriate.

Toni laughed, "It does, I would never have hired someone under those circumstances. I don't even think he's going to be any good at the job. Let's face it, you are a really difficult act to follow." She pulled me in for another kiss, all thoughts of Henry gone for the moment.

We finally got home just after 11pm, the night had seemed to drag on, and I had thought it was never going to end. I instructed Toni to sit on the sofa while I made us a pot of tea. I could hardly contain my excitement over finally being alone with Toni and the prospect of giving her the gift I had purchased. I still had nagging doubts over whether she would like it or not, but deep down believed I had chosen the right gift.

We snuggled up together on the sofa relaxing and drinking our tea. Toni had put on some Hipsway, which was one of her more relaxing choices as she had a preference for guitar bands. As we listened to the soothing tones of *'Honeytheif'*, I decided it was now or never. I wanted to give Toni her gift while it was still her birthday.

I excused myself and got up from the sofa to fetch the parcel I had carefully wrapped yesterday, along with her birthday card. When I sat back down beside Toni, she gave me a slightly puzzled look.

"I know, you wanted to keep it quiet, but I found out that today is your birthday so I got you a little something." I handed Toni the card and gift, "Happy Birthday, Toni." I lightly kissed her on the lips.

"Oh, Shona, you shouldn't have...but thank you." She smiled coyly.

For all Toni wanted to keep this day quiet I was pleased with the smile on her face. The hard part was still to come though. I waited patiently for Toni to open her gift. She politely chose to open the card first, which she thanked me for with a quick kiss. I took a deep breath as she started to remove the wrapping paper from the gift, suddenly flooded with self-doubt.

I watched pensively as Toni opened the jewellery box, which revealed a hand made silver pendant. She carefully picked it up and looked at it closely for a few moments, taking in all the detail.

"Shona, it looks beautiful, I'm sorry to say, that I don't recognise it. Can you help me out?"

I wasn't surprised to hear this; I just hoped that my explanation would go down well with Toni.

"It's a handmade silver pendant of the Clan MacLeod badge crest"

"It's lovely. What does the writing say, its Gaelic isn't it?"

"Yes. It says '*I Birn Quil I Se*', which means 'I shine, but I do not burn'. That's the Clan motto."

"Do you speak Gaelic?"

"Yes, I do. We were taught in both Gaelic and English, so I'm fluent in both." I paused waiting for Toni to inspect the pendant further; she flipped it over in her fingers then looked at me.

"What does the inscription on the back say?"

I swallowed hard knowing this could be a pivotal moment for us.

"It says, '*Is gradhaich leam thu, Toni*'."

"It sounds wonderful, but what does it mean?"

"It means I love you." I swallowed hard due to my extreme nervousness.

Toni sat absolutely still, eyes locked on mine. She tentatively reached out to stroke my cheek. "Then I'm the luckiest woman alive." Her voice sounded husky from the emotion she was feeling.

I couldn't stop the tears from rolling down my cheeks at Toni's acceptance of my love. She pulled me to her and hugged me tightly, running her fingers through my hair and kissing my head. She took my face gently in her hands and looked deeply into my eyes.

"You, Shona MacLeod, are a special person, a *very* special person. I've loved you for a long time. I would have told you before now, but I was concerned that it may have been too soon for you to hear. I love you, Shona, I love you so very much."

We moved together almost desperately, kissing each other hard. Breaking only when the need for air became a necessity, just to start all over again. Toni's hands began to roam over my body, she briefly moved over my buttocks only to suddenly break contact, moving her hands back up to my waist.

"I'm sorry," she rasped into my ear.

I knew I didn't want her to be sorry, I didn't want her to stop. I had to let her know.

I shook my head lightly, "No, don't be sorry." I pulled back to look into her eyes, "Don't stop."

Toni's head jerked up as she looked at me, searching for something, waiting.

"Please," was the only word I thought to utter and it must have been the right one because Toni took my hand and led me to her bedroom.

I was nervous, but there would be no turning back for me. I didn't want to. I felt that I had been at a precipice for so long and this time I was going to take the step that would propel me into the unknown. Toni switched on her bedside lamp, illuminating the room in a soft glow. She slowly walked back to her door where I was standing just inside. Reaching for my hand she gently tugged me towards her.

"Are you absolutely sure, Shona?" She whispered the question tentatively, sounding almost afraid, although of what I couldn't imagine.

"I'm absolutely certain," I replied, with much more confidence than I was feeling. I was most certainly afraid in this moment, but I knew that I was ready to be with Toni in every way. I had finally found the courage of my convictions. I knew there would be no turning back from this point.

Toni slipped her hands onto my hips and gently pulled me to her. Our mouths met again. There was no urgency from Toni; she took her time kissing me slowly. I think I was honestly surprised at that. I'm not sure what I thought would happen from this point, but this slow tender caress from Toni was wonderful. Her hands moved leisurely over my back and shoulders. I could feel the heat from her palms through the cotton of my blouse; feel myself melting into her touch.

For some reason my hands were totally inactive, my arms hanging loosely by my sides. I had instinctively handed all control of this moment over to Toni; such was the strength of my trust in her. As her hands mapped out my shoulders, her thumbs gently massaged my tense muscles, helping to relax me.

Toni began to kiss and nuzzle my neck and her long fingers found the buttons of my blouse and started to slowly undo them. I heard myself gasp as she started to reveal my bra but she didn't touch my breasts and carried on till my blouse was completely open. She stepped back a little and smiled at me, running the backs of her fingers over the smooth skin of my stomach. "So beautiful." I heard her whisper, as she reached to my shoulders to gently push my blouse down my arms and off my body. I swallowed hard, I was nervous, but there would be no going back.

Toni's hand trailed to the top button of my trousers, she went no further. "May I?" she asked softly, at my nod, she proceeded to undo the button and slowly pull down my zip. Toni eased my trousers over my hips and they slid down my legs to pool at my bare feet. I stepped out of them as she held my hands, offering support and encouragement. Leading me to her bed, I sat on the

edge and looked on, a spectator, while Toni removed her own clothing. A part of me lamented not being the one to undress her, but I knew on this occasion, she was leading this encounter, which was just as well. I was so nervous we could have been standing all night waiting for me to pluck up the courage to remove her clothes.

I was truly memorised as I watched Toni take off her shirt and jeans. As she stood before me in only her underwear, I was treated to my first glimpse of her beautiful flesh. I knew she would be aesthetically pleasing, but it was so much more than mere aesthetics. She looked glorious, all long limbs and sinewy, corded muscle. I couldn't tear my eyes away. Her skin looked so smooth, I felt my fingers twitch with the urge to touch it. I glanced up towards Toni's face; the look of sheer intensity there continued to hold me in rapt attention as she reached behind to unhook her bra. I felt my eyes naturally drop from her face to her chest. Watching her breasts bounce and ripple as she released them from the confines of her bra. I could feel heat flush my cheeks as I got my first look at this part of Toni. My eyes tracked back up to hers, both of us were breathing faster, now that the reality of the moment was truly upon us. The intensity had increased tenfold. I reached a hand out to Toni and with two strides she was there, engulfing me in her warm embrace. I wasn't even aware of standing up again to meet her.

Standing fully body-to-body with Toni, I was acutely aware of the last barriers of clothing between us, Toni must have been sharing similar thoughts as she reached behind me to unclasp my bra, slowly drawing it down my arms while looking at me for any sign of doubt. Seeing none she continued, moving her hands to my hips to remove my underwear.

The next few minutes were just a blur of sensation as Toni led me to her bed and proceeded to kiss me deeply, her body moving with mine as we lay together naked. She cupped my breasts, squeezing them lightly as we continued to kiss passionately. After a while her mouth moved from mine to kiss along my jaw line towards my ear, softly whispered reassurances helping to soothe my apprehension.

She gently sucked my earlobe and I whimpered at the sensation. Kissing her way down my neck, she nipped and sucked at my pulse point. I began to caress the smooth skin of her back, allowing my hands to wander over flesh that I had longed to touch. Suddenly I was aware of my own sharp intake of breath as Toni's mouth replaced one of her hands on my breast.

The sensation was unlike anything I had ever known before. My want and arousal seemed to increase in direct proportion to the moans now emanating from Toni as she sucked my nipple into her mouth.

Suddenly abandoning my breast, Toni began to kiss her way down to my navel. I could feel myself panting for breath, my chest rising and falling rapidly, my body trembling with both fear and desire.

Toni stopped and looked up at me, "It's alright, Shona. There isn't anything to be afraid of."

Her words offered me some comfort and I nodded in response. She moved back up to look at me, her body hovering over mine, but not resting her weight on me.

"If you want to stop just say, I'll understand completely. I don't want you to feel any pressure to do this." Tenderly stroking my cheek, she awaited my response.

"I don't want you to stop...please." I whispered, hoarsely.

Toni smiled and, with a parting kiss to my lips, began once more to make her way back down my body.

What happened next was totally unexpected, in truth; I had never even considered the possibility.

Before I could fully comprehend what was happening, Toni had nestled her head between my thighs and, when she began to use her mouth on me, I was momentarily shocked...until it became far too pleasurable to care anymore!

I woke to find Toni holding me and stroking my hair. I realised that I must have fallen asleep shortly after experiencing the most wonderful sensation of my young life!

I smiled in reflex at that thought. I knew I was looking dreamily into Toni's eyes, but I just couldn't help myself. I felt like I was floating along on a warm breeze without a care in the world.

"Hi," Toni husked, as she continued to stroke my face and shoulders with gentle hands.

"Hi," I replied in a voice that sounded strange to my own ears

"How are you doing?"

"Great, I feel...I don't know, but I feel fantastic."

Toni laughed gently at my reply and bent down to kiss me on the lips. I wasn't prepared for the tangy flavour there and after a moment I realised that the taste was...me. My essence.

The kiss quickly escalated as our passion grew once more. Toni rolled onto her back and drew my smaller body on top of hers. I felt my thigh slip between her legs and she gasped at the contact, her hands grasping my buttocks to pull me closer against her.

We began to rock together and I could feel the pressure begin to build once more between my legs. Our pace quickened and I could hear some grunts and moans. I really wasn't sure which one of us they were coming from, I felt as though my body had been taken over as I became totally absorbed in moving against her.

I let out a sound of protest when Toni rolled off my body and lay on her side facing me.

Encouraging me to do the same, she continued to kiss me while she languidly stroked the length of my side from shoulder to knee, and back again.

Raising my leg over her hip, she began to caress my inner thigh with her long fingers. There was no hurry to her movements as she slowly inched her way closer to my centre. My hips jumped when her fingers made contact with the sensitised skin. Easily locating the hard bundle of nerves again, Toni began to move her fingers in a circular motion and I felt the sensation begin to build anew, my hips again taking on a rhythm of their own volition.

Within minutes I was experiencing my second orgasm and, my over stimulated centre screaming in protest, I found myself unable to endure Toni's touch a moment longer, so I rolled on top of her, effectively stilling her skilled digits in the process.

Burying my face into the soft skin of Toni's neck I waited patiently for the feelings to subside.

Sometime later I shifted against Toni as I tried to move off her, only to hear her groan and hold me in place. I looked down at her to see a look of pleading on her beautiful face. It was in that moment that I suddenly realised that everything Toni had done to me, I could do to her in return, giving her the same pleasure that she had given to me.

I tentatively reached out to touch her breast. It was so soft. I could see even in the dim light that her nipple was hard and I wondered what it would be like to take it into my mouth, the same way Toni had done with mine.

I squeezed her breast, which elicited a moan of pleasure, encouraging me to go further. I slowly bent my head down and took her erect nipple into my mouth. I could hear words of encouragement coming from Toni and I felt her hips surge against me as I began to suck on her nipple.

"Yes...that feels so good, Shona," Toni whispered breathlessly, her hand moving into my hair, gently holding my head to her breast.

I continued to suck on Toni's nipple as my hands began to wander over her body, mapping out new territory. I took Toni's neglected breast in one hand while the other moved slowly, tentatively towards the juncture of her thighs. I knew I was trembling, but with what exactly I wasn't sure, fear, desire, anticipation, a mixture of all three. I could feel Toni's desire, her wetness coating my inexperienced fingers as I began to move them through her pubic hair and into the soft hot folds that lay beneath.

I truly wasn't confident in what I was doing. I tried to search out Toni's clitoris, but seemed to be all fingers and thumbs. Just as all seemed to be going wrong I felt a strong sure hand cover mine, guiding me. I quickly picked up the rhythm that Toni was showing me and she released my hand to hold me again.

"Oh, yes, Shona, just like that."

I could feel Toni moving beneath me as she approached the precipice, her hips picking up speed as my fingers danced against her. I was concentrating so hard on what I was doing I almost missed her request.

"Go inside...please?" She asked between gasps for air.

I slipped two fingers inside Toni and she cried out in pleasure, her orgasm taking hold immediately, I could feel her inner walls constricting and squeezing my fingers.

"Oh, God... Yes!" Toni screamed as she arched beneath me, lifting us both with her long legs. We seemed to be suspended in mid air until, suddenly Toni flopped back onto the mattress with a long expulsion of breath. We both lay still, and all that could be heard was the harsh breathing as she awaited her body to slow down from orgasm.

I gently removed my fingers from inside her unsure what to do with the digits liberally coated with Toni's essence. I wondered what she would taste like. It seemed odd that I had already tasted myself on her lips. There had been so many firsts for me tonight. Things I had never even imagined could happen between two women. I heard Toni sigh beneath me and contentedly mumble into my hair as she pulled me closer to her. We both fell asleep.

I awoke some time later to find myself still moulded to Toni in the same position I had fallen asleep. I turned my head towards the digital clock next to her bed; it was four in the morning and still dark outside. I felt Toni stir beneath me.

"Toni?" I whispered into the dark, as my head lay on her shoulder.

"Yes," she mumbled sleepily as she began to rub my back.

"Am I..." I stumbled over the words, but was determined to get there. "Am I still a virgin?"

Continuing to rub soothing circles near the base of my spine, she took a moment to consider her response. "Well, technically you are because there was no penetration." Toni replied softly, sounding more awake.

"Why?" I asked, curious as to the reason for Toni not taking my virginity. In truth, it had been one of my greatest fears. What it would be like, would it hurt? Would I enjoy it? I had thoroughly enjoyed everything Toni and I had done tonight, but was curious and maybe a little confused.

"I wanted you to know that sex - making love, isn't all about one act. I didn't want your first experience to be one where you hurt or felt discomfort. More than that though, I think I was as scared as you were about losing your virginity when the time came. I've never...uh, I've never

been anyone's first."

The knowledge that Toni was as nervous as I was made me all the more determined to remove this last barrier between us. Feeling bolder than I had before, I made the decision to complete my experience this night. With the woman I knew for certain that I loved.

"I would like to share that with you."

I could feel Toni nod against my head, "Whenever you're ready."

"I am."

I could feel Toni turn to face me. "You mean now?"

I nodded, "Yes," and very soon afterwards, we were experiencing a 'first' for both of us...

I awoke to the most wonderful sensations. Toni was lying naked behind me, with her front pressed to my back, her legs tucked up to mine and an arm resting on my stomach gently caressing my skin. I felt so safe and loved it was amazing.

"Good morning." I said, sounding a little hoarse.

"It certainly is." Toni replied as she kissed the back of my head.

I turned in her arms to face her. Her eyes sparkled and danced as she looked back at me, a smile on her face.

"Toni, last night, it was...amazing." I couldn't find enough words to express just how wonderful it had been.

"So, you don't have any regrets?" she asked tentatively.

"Just one..." I could see the smile slip from her face and decided not to tease, "I only wish I hadn't waited so long!"

Toni tickled my ribs, "Imp...don't do that, you had me worried for a second."

I squirmed away from her hands, laughing as my head lay back against the pillow. I looked at Toni, her head resting in her palm as she looked down at me.

"I love you Toni," I whispered. She bent down to kiss me, it was soft and warm and wonderful. When the kiss ended, Toni continued to stroke my cheek with the backs of her fingers while looking deeply into my eyes.

"You're so beautiful, Shona. You melt my heart."

I could feel the tears begin to gather behind my eyelids and I fought to keep them from falling.

"Shhh, what's wrong," Toni cooed softly.

"Nothing. Really, it's just that no-one has ever said anything like that to me before, it's a little overwhelming."

"In a good way I hope?"

I nodded, "Yes, in a very good way." Toni pulled me into a hug and I must have dozed off, as the next time I awoke it was to find myself alone in bed. In the distance, I could just hear the sound of the shower, as I lay awake listening to the woman I loved as she moved around in the bathroom.

That led to thoughts and memories of the night before. It had been amazing, just nothing like I had imagined. I had never considered that sex could entail so much pleasure. I had amazed myself on more than one occasion with the sounds I had made and the want that I had exhibited. Even now, I could feel a pleasant ache between my legs just thinking about what had happened. I was tender, but I enjoyed that feeling, simply because it was Toni's doing. She had taken all I had to offer with such gentleness and kindness that my heart swam with the memories. I snuggled further into the duvet, able to smell Toni, her perfume, her essence. The smell of our lovemaking, it was everywhere, surrounding me. I felt giddy with joy.

"I have to get going. I wish I could spend the day with you, but I'm opening up." Toni had a look of regret on her face. I would have loved for her to be able to spend the day with me, but it wasn't going to happen.

"Its okay, I understand."

"I'll see you at teatime?" she asked hopefully.

"I'm working tonight," I sighed and Toni let out a little snort.

"Looks like we are going to have to plan our schedules better, that is if we want to spend more time together."

I nodded my agreement.

"I'll pick you up tonight, after work?"

I smiled, "See you then."

Toni leaned down to kiss me, I was amazed at how quickly the kiss escalated, it was clear we both wanted more, but there was no time. She pulled away, her pupils dilated as she gave me a long look. "Later," she mumbled and quickly left.

I got up shortly after Toni left. I showered and had a late breakfast. Dressed and feeling refreshed, I sat down with the intention of writing to Isobel. I was so desperate to share my news with her. I chewed on the end of my pen as I considered what I wanted to put in my letter, I hated chewing pens, but I just couldn't seem to break the habit. My old school mistress, Mrs. Murray must have told me off at least twice a day to get me to stop. Obviously it never worked. I started the letter as I normally would, hoping the words I needed would come as I wrote:

Dearest Isobel,

How have things been at home? How is everyone? Well, I hope. I wish I could telephone you today to share my news. You always said you wanted any details so I'm sharing them with you. Toni and I, well we have moved our relationship to the next level. Oh, Isobel, it was wonderful. I never knew it could be so amazing. Why didn't you tell me!?

I'm in love, Isobel; I'm really truly in love, with a woman! I could never have imagined this in all my wildest dreams. Yes, I know, they were never that wild to begin with, but I bet even you could never have imagined it! I'm so happy, Isobel, will you call me? I just can't wait to share everything with you. Speak to you soon little sis'.

*Lots of love,
Shona.*

If that doesn't get her to call, then nothing will! I sealed the envelope, taking care to address it to my grandmothers home, before I headed to the post office to send the letter first class.

Work that night was slow, but I was in such a good mood I didn't really mind. Susie was at the bar, a regular customer; she was really nice to chat to. Since starting work at *The Fern*, I had immediately struck up a friendship with Susie. She popped in most lunchtimes for some food with a couple of the girls she worked with at the bank. Then, one Tuesday night, alone and sat at the bar reading a book. We got talking and it turned out that Susie lived just a few doors down from the bar, above the Chinese take-away. Our friendship grew from there. Knowing I was

working that evening, she decided to pop in for some company.

"Hi, Susie, can I get you another?"

"Just a coke for me, Shona, it's a school day tomorrow."

"Huh, but I thought you worked in the bank?"

"I do, Shona," she said laughing. "It's just an expression."

I rolled my eyes at my own stupidity and groaned.

"When is your next night off?"

I wasn't sure why Susie was asking but the thought dampened my spirits a little. I had Friday night off and Toni was working. She had tried to get the time off also, but Cath had a party, so she had to work that night.

"Friday," I sighed. Susie gave me a strange look, obviously expecting me to be more enthusiastic about it.

"How about you and me having a night out?"

In truth it didn't sound like a bad idea, I would be at a loose end anyway.

"What did you have in mind?"

"*Misty's*, the night club."

I knew where she was talking about. I passed it every time I came into work. I did wonder what it would be like inside.

"I've never been."

"It's pretty good. I've been once or twice with the girls from work."

"I meant, I've never been to a night club."

"You haven't? Well, I think we have to change that as soon as possible."

"I don't know, Susie. I'm not sure about a night club."

"It'll be fine, Shona, I promise. You would be doing me a really big favour, please say you'll go?"

"What kind of favour?"

"I just feel like I'm ready to start dating again, enjoying myself. I've been living the quiet life ever since David left. It's time for me to start getting out more."

Susie had told me all about David, her ex fiancé. Engaged to be married they had bought a flat and moved in together. Three months later David had broken off the engagement, saying he wasn't ready to get married or to be in a committed relationship. Susie had found the break-up very hard to get over. If she was ready to move on then I was ready to help...and try my first night club.

"Alright, I'll go."

"You will? Fantastic!"

"You have to tell me what to wear? I have no idea what to choose."

"Don't panic, Shona, you'll be fine, I promise."

We spent the rest of the evening chatting about fashion and music.

Chapter 19

"I could pop into *Misty's* after I close up tonight, give you a lift home...or you could just call me when you're ready for a lift?"

I lifted my head from my dinner plate to look at Toni. "Oh, you don't have to do that, I can get a taxi home." I watched Toni's face closely for any reaction to my suggestion. I really did appreciate her enthusiasm to make sure I was safe, but tonight I felt like being independent. "I don't want you to go to any trouble for me."

"It's no trouble, Shona. I'm more than happy to give you a lift home."

Toni words seemed a little short to me, it could have been my imagination, but I got the feeling something about my night out was bothering her.

"Is everything alright, Toni?" I watched as she blew out a breath and ran one of her hands through her hair.

"No, not really. Look I'm sorry, Shona, but I'm feeling a little over protective towards you. I know you're a big girl and can look after yourself, but...damn, I'm just not handling this well."

Toni shook her head in disgust, got up from her chair and paced over to the bay window that looked out over the harbour. I knew she was having an internal struggle with her own emotions. Battling against her instincts to protect me, but knowing that she was being a little overbearing. I slowly walked up behind her and slipped my arms around her waist, snuggling into her back. Her hands automatically covered mine, her gesture conveying acceptance of the comfort I offered her.

"Actually, I would love to see you later tonight," I wasn't convinced that I was selling my sincerity to Toni, "I'm sure Susie won't mind you joining us later."

Toni turned in my arms to face me, she kissed me lightly on the lips, "Thanks, that's sweet, but we both know I just have to get over it and stop being a baby." We stood holding each other for a few moments longer, absorbing the others comfort and warmth.

"If I have any trouble at all, I'll call you, I promise."

Toni smiled ruefully then kissed my forehead. "That's good to hear, it makes me feel a little better." She glanced at her watch, "I have to get going otherwise I'll be late opening up." She tipped my head up to look into my eyes, "You have a really good night, and I genuinely mean that."

We shared another quick kiss and then Toni was grabbing her keys and rushing out the door. I took my time getting ready. I had chosen to wear a pair of pin stripe dress trousers with a pink silk blouse. I applied some light make-up and a little *Ysatis* perfume. I selected a pair of gold studs for my ears and a light gold chain to put around my neck, finishing of my look with a pair of black two-inch heels and a black dress jacket. Glancing at the clock above the fireplace, I had fifteen minutes to spare before the next bus into town. I checked that my small black leather bag had everything I would need in it for the evening, then shouldered it and made the short walk to the bus stop.

I walked into *The Fern*, which was situated on the main high street in Portobello, my eyes adjusting to the sharp change from light to dark, it took a moment to spot Susie over in one of the corner seats. She smiled and waved and I made my way over, returning her wave.

"Hi. You been waiting long?"

"Oh, no, I'm a little early, you just don't strike me as the type to be late so I made an extra effort," Susie answered cheekily. Though we both knew she was right.

"What would you like to drink, Shona?"

I glanced down at the table and noticed that Susie had her usual half-pint of cider and blackcurrant, I very briefly entertained the notion of trying one, then quickly quashed the idea. If I had something to drink this early I would never last the night.

"I'll have a coke, thanks."

"Sure I can't tempt you to try something a wee bit stronger?" She asked with a slight tease to her voice.

"No, not just now, but maybe later," I added, on a more upbeat note, though I wasn't sure if I would drink at all. I watched as Susie made her way to the bar. I found myself absently considering Susie aesthetically. She was pretty, with lovely deep red hair and a light dusting of freckles that covered her fair skin, two characteristics that ran in my own family, but had skipped me. Susie was a couple of inches taller than myself, I was confident that she wouldn't have any trouble attracting male attention, especially with her warm brown eyes and sweet welcoming smile. She was definitely a catch.

I sipped my coke and we chatted about our plans for the immediate future. I told Susie of my love of history, particular early Scottish history. She asked what I intended to do when I finished university, it was a question which had been put to me many times in the past year. I was still uncertain of what I wanted to be. A historian for sure, I just loved learning about the past. I never wanted to stop.

"Do you want to teach history?"

"Maybe, but first I want to keep on learning from others. I want to travel to places that are steeped in the past where I can get a real sense of what things were like. I do like the idea of passing on knowledge and my love of history to others; I don't have any set plans at the moment though.

"What about you, are you wanting a career in banking?" I asked.

"I think so, it was a job I took straight out of school. It has good prospects and it pays fairly well. I got a good mortgage rate out of it, which is just as well because it's difficult enough meeting all the household bills on my own now that David has left."

Susie had bought out his part of the mortgage and continued to live in the property. I could understand how going from a double to a single income would be a drain on her finances.

"I'm really lucky that Toni has been so accommodating, letting me stay at her flat over the summer. The prices for renting a room in a decent flat are very high. The student flats tend to be cheaper, but are cramped due to multiple tenancies and often in need of repair. Since I'm looking so late it seems that those are the only options available to me, I'm beginning to despair."

"Which areas are you considering?" Susie asked as she sipped her purple coloured drink.

"I don't want to live on the other side of town, it would be so far from work." Not to mention Toni, but I would keep that information to myself. "So, I've been looking at anything from the centre of town out to here."

"You can't stay on at Toni's?"

"Well, yes I could. Toni said I was welcome to stay as long as I needed to, but it's only a one bedroom flat and I already feel bad about how long I've imposed on her. I, ah.... had a bit of trouble with my father when I returned home for the summer. Toni helped me out in an emergency, it was never meant to be a long term solution."

"I see," Susie paused considering something for a moment. "I have a spare room that I could rent to you, Shona, that is, if you wanted it. I think we get on well enough to be able to share the same space. What do you think?"

I was momentarily stunned by Susie's suggestion. In truth it could be an ideal solution to my accommodation problem, but I didn't want to take advantage of Susie's good nature, what if she were only offering the room because I was in a spot? I had to be sure.

"Are you positive you want a lodger, Susie?"

"In truth, Shona, I could really do with the extra cash from the rent and someone to share the bills. Like I said, since David left, making ends meet has been tough. Seriously, if you're interested, I definitely would like to offer the room for rent. I've been thinking about it for a wee while, but I didn't feel too comfortable at the thought of sharing my space with a stranger. I know we haven't know each other too long, but we get on pretty well."

That was certainly true; we did get on well. I already considered Susie a good friend in a short space of time. This could really work out well for both of us, but I knew I would have to give it a little more thought.

"It sounds like a great offer, but I think I would like some time to consider it a little more."

Susie nodded her agreement. "How about you come to visit the flat tomorrow, see what you think? That might help you come to a decision. And, Shona, if it's not what you want, don't be afraid to say so. There will be no hard feelings if you decide not to rent the room."

We clinked our glasses together and drank up. It was getting towards 10pm, the time when the club started to get busy. We said our goodbyes to the staff behind the bar and some of the regular customers. Working behind a bar and drinking in the same place on your nights off, I noticed, could certainly have its benefits. I had been offered many drinks in the hour and a half I had been in The Fern. As it was I had only had two cokes and not paid for either drink. When I went to the bar for our second round, Jimmy, the owner had refused my money. When I insisted he said my money was hard earned and he wouldn't take it back over the bar. I thought that was really sweet of him, he was a nice guy.

We made our way on to the High street; it was less than a ten-minute walk to *Misty's*, which was on the way back out of town towards Toni's flat. Susie was certainly more merry than when I first arrived, I think the cider was beginning to go to her head. It was almost dark outside as we made our way along the pavement. We got to the main junction in the seaside town and Susie grabbed hold of my arm.

"Shona, could we stop by the *Railwaymen's club*?"

I looked at her curiously, wondering why on earth she wanted to go there.

"I don't work there anymore, but I'm sure I would have no trouble getting a member to sign us in."

"Great, lets go!"

She started to practically drag me down the street towards the club.

"Can I ask why you want to go there?" I enquired, as I tried valiantly to keep up with her.

She stopped so abruptly we almost collided. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Sure."

"Eddie."

"Eddie?" I was puzzled.

"Yes, Eddie. Dear God, Shona, you can't tell me you haven't noticed how good-looking the guy is? When he does the banking instead of Toni, all the cashiers are practically drooling over the counter looking at him, including Alan, he thinks Eddie could be gay, but I don't think so." She grabbed my arm suddenly, "Is he?"

"Is he what?" The conversation was moving so quickly I was struggling to keep up. Susie rolled her eyes.

"Is Eddie gay"

I blinked, "I don't think so."

"Is he seeing anyone?"

I shrugged, "I don't think so."

"I hope not, he is gorrrrrgeous."

I couldn't be imagining the purr that Susie just affected. I blinked at her in wonder; this was no longer my sweet friend who seemed a little shy at times, though certainly not in my league. This was a woman on a mission! I needed a plan and fast.

I opened the door to the club and we ventured inside. As luck would have it John, whom I had got to know very well from my Monday nights at the club was walking out of the gents.

"Hullo, Shona!"

One of the principle problems with people drinking alcohol for several hours was their inability to control the volume of their voice. I was sure that the entire club now knew I had entered the place.

"Hi, John, could you uhm, do me a favour and sign myself and my friend into the club?"

John glanced at his watch, "Ah, you see it's just after 10pm and strictly speaking, you're not allowed to sign anyone in after 10pm, but since it's you ma' bonnie lass, I'll make an exception."

We walked into the main hall and approached the bar. I was overcome with a sudden nervousness. I must have slowed my pace, as I felt Susie gently nudge me along. I glanced behind the bar and there she was, I could actually feel my stomach flutter, she looked incredible. She turned around and looked right at me, it was almost as if she sensed I was there. I watched as Toni smiled reflexively, then her smile turned to a frown and she approached the two of us.

"Hi, Shona, what brings you two in here tonight? Is everything okay?"

"I...uhh..." That was all I managed and to make matters worse I could feel the blush burning my cheeks.

"Hang on a sec...Eddie," she called, "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Toni left the bar and walked into the main hall, she gently guided me towards the hatch where the dirty glasses were stacked for washing. I noticed there were a quite few and it was the quietest night of the weekend, not a good sign.

"What's wrong?" Toni asked with concern.

I shook my head, "Absolutely nothing, honestly."

Toni frowned, not convinced with my answer.

"Susie asked if we could come in here on the way to *Misty's*, I had no idea she was going to do that."

"This place isn't even on the way, I thought she was on a manhunt?"

"She is." I pointed to the bar, where she was chatting to Eddie.

Toni smiled, "Ah, I get it, she has the hots for him and dragged you down here so she could have an excuse to see him." Toni laughed.

"I was thinking, Toni..."

"Go on." She answered sounding as though she knew exactly what was coming next.

"Well, perhaps you and Eddie would like to join us when you're finished here?"

"So you're playing match maker now, you're just full of surprises, Shona MacLeod." I watched as Toni fingered the pendant around her neck. I glanced down shyly.

"I'll speak to Eddie and see if he wants to come along, either way I'll pop in to let you know, alright?"

"Great, Susie will..." I was stopped mid sentence by the sight of a mass of aqua and purple. Toni glanced towards where I was looking and I could hear a low growl emanate from her throat. I turned to look at her, wide eyed, my mouth open trying to find the words. Toni shook her head slightly and led me back past the bar to the foyer. I heard her mutter a curse under her breath she pointed a finger back towards where we had just been standing.

"That was Henry, sporting his own idea of the weekend dress code."

"Toni, he was wearing a shell suit." I was stating the obvious, but it was just too unbelievable.

"I think he's in training for a new cult, because it sure as hell isn't the marathon!"

"I had to wear a skirt." Even I was outraged.

"I know and you looked so cute in it. Now I have to look at Henry wearing a stained shell suit that is too tight over his beer gut."

"Have you said anything?"

"Damn right I have. He seems to have this strange notion that Friday is dress down day."

I actually giggled as I thought once again of the sight of Henry in a shell suit. He certainly did have a considerable beer belly and with his unruly hair, thick glasses and stubble, he truly was quite a sight.

"Don't you dare laugh, it's not funny." I peered up at Toni, I could tell she wasn't quite ready to see the funny side, "He better come in dressed properly tomorrow night or there will be hell to pay at the next committee meeting. The man is a slob!"

"He could do with taking a bit more care of himself." I agreed only to have Toni glare at me. She started ticking off Henry's faults with her hands.

"He needs a bath, a haircut and a shave. He needs to wash and iron his clothes and he needs to...arghh...get out of my bar!" Toni finished her sentence with her voice becoming more forceful with each word.

"Maybe I coul..."

"Don't you dare even mention coming back here to wash the glasses," Toni cautioned.

I was about to do just that, even though it wasn't what I wanted to do.

"This is my problem, I'll deal with it. You don't have to worry about what happens around this place anymore." Toni smiled to soften her words. "I'm sorry, you just caught me at a bad time. Go to *Misty's* with Susie and I'll try my best to talk Eddie into coming along."

"Okay, I will."

"And, Shona?" I looked at Toni expectantly. "Have fun."

"Thanks." I blushed and turned quickly in search of Susie. When Toni mentioned having fun, the tone of her voice and the look in her eyes had me picturing myself, not at the nightclub, but naked in her bed. I blushed even harder.

"What's wrong with you, you look a little flushed?" Susie enquired.

"Nothing," I mumbled. "C'mon, we better get going." I grabbed Susie's arm to help usher her out of the club."

"Bye, Eddie," she called. I waved towards the bar staff and received a knowing wink from Toni, which made me blush yet again.

"Are you sure you're feeling alright Shona?"

"Yes, really, I'm just a little flustered." I changed the subject of my colouring as quickly as I could. "Toni is going to try and talk Eddie into joining us at the club when they finish."

"Oh, great! You are a sweetheart, Shona!" She then proceeded to kiss me soundly on the lips.

We arrived at the club just minutes later. According to Susie, a few years ago *Misty's* used to be a cinema. She had taken to telling me any history she knew about the town on the short walk to the club, I really appreciated her efforts, no matter how disjointed they were. I couldn't quite understand how kids could pay the cinema admission fee using a jam jar, but Susie assured me her grandfather said a "*clean jeelie jar got him intae' the picture hoose!*" The way she mimicked her grandfather made me giggle.

We walked up the expansive marble steps to the glass doors of *Misty's*, where two burly looking men stood. I wasn't surprised when I was asked for identification. Though nineteen, I was often mistaken for being younger. I showed him my student identity card, which confirmed I was over eighteen and old enough to drink.

As soon as we entered the foyer of the club I could immediately hear the dull beat and feel the vibration of the music. We paid the entrance fee of £2 then checked our jackets into the cloakroom. Susie had been here before so I just followed her lead. She led us through some double doors, which opened out into the main part of the club. The heat and volume of the music immediately assaulted my senses. It was so loud! I recognised the song playing, it was the current number one, Rick Astley's *Never Gonna Give You Up*. I looked out onto a busy dance floor. It took up a large portion of the centre of the club, with all the seating and tables around the sides. You had to walk down a few steps to get to the dance floor. A large bar was on the opposite wall from the doors we had just walked through. I could see blue and red neon signs. The club looked really plush, especially compared to the *Railwaymen's club* and *The Fern*. There were chandeliers on the ceiling and the bar staff were really well dressed all wearing black trousers or skirts with crisp white batwing collar shirts and black bowties.

The décor looked state of the art and I had never seen so many different drinks and mixers behind a bar before. There was a promotion on a drink called *Biarritz*, which Susie decided to try. I opted to try a half-pint of cider with a dash of blackcurrant. The drink Susie normally had at *The Fern*.

We chose a table with a good view of the dance floor. Susie explained that she wanted to see the action. I let my eyes wander over the people dancing. They were all dressed to impress and dancing to attract attention, I was suddenly nervous and opted for a gulp of my cider. I was pleasantly surprised by the taste, the blackcurrant removing any hint of alcoholic flavour from the cider, making it taste more like a sweet fizzy drink. I glanced back out to the dancers moving so assuredly, I wasn't certain I would make it onto the dance floor tonight. I didn't have that sort of confidence, so was shocked when Susie grabbed my hand and pulled me towards it!

"C'mon, Shona, I love this song!" she declared loudly as she half dragged a reluctant me down the three steps onto the dance floor. I never even had time to utter a protest before I found myself standing there moving awkwardly to the sound of M/A/R/R/S *Pump Up The Volume* with Susie screaming "*This is gonnae be the new number one!*" I nodded, who was I to argue with Susie's musical predictions. I knew enough to know what I liked, beyond that I was out of my depth. I hardly recognised any of the music Toni ever played, but she kept assuring me that decent music was coming back, and we would move on from the electronic nightmare we were currently

enduring. Whatever that meant?

As the night wore on I danced a few times with Susie, feeling more confident and a little tipsy. I was beginning to really enjoy the atmosphere. The loud beat of the music and the alcohol both mixing to pleasantly affect my mood. The only downside was a very persistent guy who wouldn't take no for an answer. After my third refusal to dance with him, Susie gave me a funny look. She had occasionally danced with his friend while he hung around our table.

"Why don't you just dance with him?" she asked, puzzled.

"I don't want to encourage him. What if he gets the wrong idea?"

"Then just tell him to get lost."

I looked at Susie feeling my eyes bulge at the prospect of being that rude. She laughed and patted my thigh.

"Sorry, Shona. I forgot you could never do that, you're far too sweet." She pondered for a moment, "but listen, if you want to dance with him, just to dance, go ahead. If he gets the wrong idea, I'll give him short shrift." We both chuckled at that. It wasn't the main reason though. I just didn't feel right about dancing with someone else now that Toni and I were lovers. I wasn't sure what she would think about it.

Funky Town came on. I loved this song and for a change I got Susie up to dance. We had been on the floor less than a minute when two guys cut in to dance with each of us. I really had no option but to go with it, or leave the dance floor. I gave a strained smile to my new dance partner and briefly took in his appearance. He was dressed similarly to many of the men there that night. A bright shirt with a suit, the jacket sleeves rolled up. Slip on shoes with white socks. This seemed to be the 'in' look. His hair was in a side parting and flicked back, exposing the many layers cut into the style. It was a very similar haircut to Eddie's and I briefly wondered if they used the same barber.

"Hi, my name's Sean, nice to meet you." He continued dancing and smiling at me, obviously waiting for me to respond.

"Nice to meet you, Sean, I'm Shona."

"That's a lovely accent you have, Shona. Where are you from?"

"The Western Isles."

"Oh, *The Western Isles*." He mimicked my accent, which happened a lot. "And what's a lovely looking lassie like you doing in a place like this?"

"I'm here with my friend. She wanted to have a night out." I was straining to be heard over the

loud music, conversation, not that I really wanted one, was almost impossible on the dance floor.

He briefly glanced over at Susie then continued dancing. He bent close to my ear, "you're gorgeous, Shona." I smiled politely, unsure how to respond to that.

When the song finished Sean and his friend followed us back to our table and sat down beside us. This was what I had been dreading ever since I recognised the possibility. We were now stuck with two guys who wanted to chat us up.

"What would you girls like to drink?" Sean's friend asked. I looked to Susie, hoping that she would handle the situation. After all she wanted to see Eddie and he might be here soon.

"Oh, you don't have to do that, we have a drink."

"No, we insist, come on, just one drink." Sean's friend was persuasive.

"What's that you're drinking, Shona?" Sean asked.

"It's cider and blackcurrant." I answered politely.

"Sweet, just like you." He smiled and I couldn't help but blush. I was hoping it was too dark for anyone to notice.

"So that's two cider and blackcurrants. Be right back ladies."

They had guessed correctly at Susie's drink. She had given up on the *Biarritz*, declaring it disgusting after one mouthful.

"Shona, he is so cute!" She grabbed my arm and squeezed exuberantly.

I looked at her puzzled, "I thought you liked Eddie?"

"Not Pete, you dummy. The guy you are with. What's his name?"

"Sean."

"He looks like Marti Pellow." I looked even more confused. "The lead singer of Wet, Wet, Wet...Oh, never mind, anyway he's gorgeous."

"I hadn't noticed." It was the truth. I hadn't considered whether Sean was good looking or not. I only had eyes for Toni.

Susie looked at me like I was mad. "Are you not interested in dating, Shona?"

How to answer that question? I realised I had a decision to make. Hide my relationship with Toni from anyone who asked or tell them the truth. I didn't like the thought of hiding it. It made it

sound like I was embarrassed and I wasn't. However, I didn't like the idea of telling just anyone my business. I had a right to my privacy. How selective could I be? I just wasn't sure what the answer was. On this occasion I decided to go with my instincts, Susie was a friend who was offering me a room in her flat. I decided that if we were to share a flat, she would have to know. If it were going to be a problem, I would rather find out now, before I moved in. With that decided I opened my mouth to reply...

"There's Eddie!" Susie grabbed my arm giving it squeeze. I turned in the direction she was looking to see Eddie walking towards us. I looked around for Toni and saw her at the bar. I smiled in pure reflex even though she wasn't looking my way.

"This is great!" I nodded an absent reply to Susie as I continued to look at Toni.

"Hello, Shona, Susie. Fancy meeting you here." Eddie teased as he stood at the table. Just as he was about to sit down Sean and Pete arrived back with our drinks. The timing was terrible. Ignoring Eddie completely they sat on either side of Susie and myself, acting like they had been there all night. Without another word, Eddie turned on his heel and walked away.

"I'll be right back." Susie declared and took off after him. Leaving a puzzled Pete to stare at her departing figure.

"Boyfriend trouble?" Sean enquired.

I wasn't sure what to say. "Not exactly, but she likes him."

"Ah, I see and Pete just made things difficult for her." I nodded.

"Pete, do one."

"What?"

"The lassie's no interested man."

"Ah, got you. I'll see you later."

"Pete's no' exactly quick on the uptake, you know."

"Ehm, I'm waiting for someone too."

"Boyfriend?" Sean asked.

"No, she's at the bar, she will be here in a moment."

"Phew, you had me worried there, Shona. I'm sure your pal will no' mind me sitting here chatting with you."

Seems that Pete wasn't the only one not quick on the uptake. I groaned internally at my current plight. I looked towards the bar and saw Susie chatting with Eddie while Toni was being served.

"So, lovely, Shona, what brings you to the city?" Sean asked as his arm snaked along the back of the seats. I leaned forward to keep well away from his wandering limbs.

"I'm a student."

"A student, eh. What are you studying?"

"History."

"So you're a clever lassie then, not just a pretty face." Sean smiled. He did have a kind of cheeky grin, which went with his personality, but it was doing nothing for me. I glanced again towards the bar, very relieved to see Toni walking towards us. She had a smile on her face, which turned a little forced when she glanced at Sean. I really wasn't sure what Toni's reaction would be so I sat quietly and waited, what happened next was truly unexpected. Toni put her drink on the table and leaned past Sean.

"Would you like to dance?" She was looking straight at me holding her hand out and smiling.

"But..."

Sean clearly wanted to object but I don't think he knew what his objection would be.

"Yes?" Toni asked Sean.

"I'm sitting with her."

"Does that mean she isn't allowed to dance with anyone else?"

"Well no, but..."

Toni raised an eyebrow at him, awaiting his objection, when none was forthcoming she turned to me again.

"Well?"

"Yeah," I nodded vigorously. "I would love to dance."

As I moved past Sean to dance with Toni, she looked back at him, "Bye." She delivered with one of her winning smiles.

The poor guy sat there with a stunned look on his face, totally deflated. He numbly lifted his drink and went off, I assumed in search of Pete. Maybe they could find a clue together. I giggled at that thought, then felt a little bad. Sean was nice, just a little too sure of himself.

"What are you giggling at?"

"Poor Sean, going off to find a clue." I giggled some more.

"Well poor Sean shouldn't try to chat up my girlfriend..." Toni stopped to look into my eyes.
"Who is obviously a little drunk. C'mon, let's dance hot stuff."

As Toni drove us home, the short journey couldn't be over quickly enough for me. My hands itched to touch her. She had already removed my wandering hand from her thigh a couple of times, glancing over at me with a puzzled look upon her beautiful face. I sighed, Toni was a truly stunning woman, I wasn't sure if I had told her that, but I intended to tell her tonight. As we got to Toni's street she slowed down and looked for a parking space, it was always a nightmare trying to find one later at night after everyone else was home for the evening. Cars lined both sides of the street, some leaving barely enough space between them for a person to walk between, others leaving a space frustratingly not quite large enough for another car to park.

"There!"

"What?"

"There's a space." I pointed across the road to what I thought looked like a big enough space to park.

"There is no way I can park in that."

"But it looks the same length as your car." I affected a pout, I was sure the space was big enough.

"It is, but there's no room to manoeuvre." Toni replied in a practical tone, which just irritated me further. I crossed my arms over my chest and sat quietly while she found a suitable space. Unfortunately it was in the next street down and I was becoming more impatient and frustrated by the second. Once the car was parked I got out, locked the passenger side door and walked quickly back towards Toni's flat. She used her long strides to catch up with me.

"Where is the fire?"

I glared at Toni, my breathing a little ragged, she looked into my eyes and obviously saw enough there to realise what this was all about.

"Oh," she swallowed hard taking me by the hand to make sure I kept up with her!

We practically ran up the stairs, I don't know if it was my imagination, but they really seemed to be much easier to ascend after a few glasses of cider. We were both breathing hard as we reached the front door. Toni had her keys in her hand and was fumbling with the lock. I couldn't wait any

longer and pounced on her lips, kissing her soundly. I felt exhilarated.

"Mhphh...the neighbours," Toni gasped, looking mildly shocked. I don't really think she cared about the neighbours, I think I had stunned her.

She smiled wickedly as she finally got the door open.

As soon as Toni closed the door behind us I was all over her again, kissing her deeply while my fingers worked at the buttons of her shirt. I think at some stage in my alcohol-addled brain I briefly recall a mild protest from Toni, but I was too far gone to react to it. I wanted her naked and underneath me and I wanted it now. In the cold light of day, I would never believe I was capable of such thought or actions.

We stumbled down the hall towards Toni's bedroom. She seemed to have done a better job of undressing me than I had of her. She was still wearing way too many clothes. I set about changing that fact as quickly as possible.

Finally, both naked, we tumbled onto the soft mattress. At some point in the proceedings, Toni had decided to relinquish all control to me, allowing me to lead and now, as she lay underneath me, I began to kiss my way down her gorgeous body.

I suddenly became aware of my destination, and, it was at that moment that I finally realised what my urgent need this evening had really been about. I wanted to taste Toni.

I had been thinking about this since the night we first made love.

When Toni used her mouth on me, I was in absolute awe, not believing that she could do such a thing. It had been a shockingly wonderful experience. Now I wanted to complete that experience, by doing the same to Toni.

"Oh my god," I heard her whisper, when she too became aware of my destination. I felt her tremble beneath me, her stomach quivering under the attention of my lips and fingertips. I felt her hands move into my hair, wanting to urge me on, but trying not to be forceful. Her hips bucked up to meet my mouth as I drew nearer to my goal and then I was there. My first taste of her was warm and salty. I plunged my tongue into her hot depths and heard her cry out my name. My arms instinctively wrapped around her thighs, palms coming to rest on her taut stomach. I began to move upwards, towards Toni's clitoris. Tentative at first, I began by slowly moving my tongue over the area and then, as Toni's words encouraged me to become less inhibited, I increased my pace and applied more pressure. Toni's legs began to tremble and her hips thrust into my face until, finally, I took her entire clitoris into my mouth and sucked on it until she screamed her orgasm into the night.

As she lay spent and recovering, I slowly made my way back up her long body, deliberately keeping my weight off her as she recovered. Her eyes opened when she sensed me above her.

"You are amazing," she purred.

"And you are beautiful." I replied reverently.

She pulled me towards her and held me in a strong embrace. Her thigh snaked between mine and rose to meet my centre. Without conscious thought I found myself thrusting happily against Toni's hard muscled thigh. She grasped my hips aiding my movement and helping anchor me in place. It wasn't long before I was sobbing my pleasure into her shoulder, and biting down as I did so. It caused her to yelp a little in surprise but I think both of us had been very pleasantly surprised that night.

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~ Licit Cusp ~

by weebod

DISCLAIMERS: See [Part 1](#).

FEEDBACK: If you enjoy the story please let me know: weebod@mac.com

Part Four:

Chapter 20

The following day I went to visit Susie. Her flat was indeed directly above the Chinese take-away. Susie greeted me enthusiastically and immediately told me what happened after I had left *Misty's* with Toni the night before.

"Shona! You won't believe it! Eddie walked me home..." Susie paused for effect, so I knew there was more. "We said goodnight at the bottom of the stairs, and then he kissed me!" Susie proceeded to drag me by the arm into her sitting room and guide me to one of the sofas. "And guess what?" I knew not to answer, but smiled reflexively at her excitement. "We are going out on Monday night." She flopped onto the other sofa with a goofy grin on her face. It was great to see her looking so happy.

"That's great news, Susie. Eddie is a really nice guy."

"And, so good looking!" She stopped, "Oops, where are my manners, would you like a cup of tea?"

I nodded, "That would be lovely."

Susie's kitchen was actually recessed within her living room, so she didn't have far to go and continued to chat as she made the tea.

"It's a shame you left so soon, last night. That guy Sean was really into you."

Susie was reaching into a cupboard as she said this. I had never got the chance to finish my sentence the previous evening, so she still had no idea that Toni was my girlfriend. I had to tell her now otherwise there would be no point in even looking at the room she had for rent. I felt somewhat nervous at the prospect of telling Susie that I was a lesbian. I wasn't ashamed, but I did fear her censure. What if she thought homosexuality was wrong? This was a potential barrier to friendship, acceptance of me as a person. It suddenly struck me as being so very wrong. I would tell Susie out of necessity, but a part of me felt resentment, not at Susie, but at society and the sudden dilemma I had been presented with simply because I chose to love a woman. My head was beginning to hurt.

"Shona? Is everything alright?"

I looked into the kitchen area to find Susie regarding me with concern. I had been so tied up in my thoughts I had forgotten to answer her enquiry about Sean.

Susie hurried over to me and set the mugs of tea on the coffee table. "Did something happen last night? I was so busy making eyes at Eddie I didn't take the time to make sure you were doing okay. I'm sorry, Shona, when I saw you dancing with Toni I assumed you were fine."

I licked my lips nervously before answering. "I was fine, more than fine in fact. There's something I didn't get the chance to tell you last night." At Susie's concerned nod I continued, "You see, Toni...that is Toni and me, we go out together."

"Great, I assumed you were friends." Susie picked up her mug and took a sip of the hot brew. "So like, do you two usually go to pubs or what?"

I took a deep breath, realising that my explanation hadn't been enough for Susie; I was going to have to work on that aspect of communication. "We, ah, we date, like you and Eddie." There I had said it, the words were out there hanging in the air between us. I watched as the realisation dawned on Susie, her eyes went round and she looked positively speechless.

"Oh...I had never considered that a possibility, I mean I know that women sleep together, but I..."

She shook her head as if trying to clear it. This wasn't going well, I didn't know what to expect when I told Susie, but I had hoped she would be fine with the information, now I wasn't so sure. "Look, I know not everyone is comfortable with homosexuality, I understand if you want to change your mind about renting your spare room to me."

Susie blinked, as she took in that information. "What...no, no! Not at all." She paused, "I have no problem with you and Toni being gay, none whatsoever. I knew Toni was gay; she dated one of the girls from the bank last year. I just had never considered that you and her were a couple."

I heaved a huge sigh of relief and picked up my cup of now cooling tea to wet my dry mouth. Maybe this could work out after all. I was about to ask Susie if she would show me the room, when something entirely different slipped out of my mouth without warning.

"She did?"

Susie nodded, "Yeah, Amanda. It didn't last long, as far as I can remember. They went out a few times then it fizzled out. Well, it did for Toni at least. Poor Amanda was quite upset at the time, she really liked her."

"Oh."

"Hey, not to worry, that was months ago, Amanda has a new girlfriend now and is very happy. At least she was the last time I spoke to her. Look, Shona, it wasn't a serious thing they had. Like I said just a few dates towards the end of last year."

That sounded better. I really needed to address these feelings of jealousy I had whenever I thought about Toni with another woman. It was quite a startling revelation to me. I had no idea this trait was even part of me until I met Toni.

"I'm glad to hear Amanda has found someone new."

Susie smiled. "Come on, I'll show you the room."

The room was going to be perfect, well not quite. I wouldn't have a sea view, despite the fact that my bedroom window would face the sea. Unfortunately there was another tenement block immediately behind Susie's. On the plus side the room was a decent size, just a little smaller than the one I had at Mrs. Ramsay's. It was already furnished in a nice modern style, in mostly creams and some rose pink. It had a much more feminine feel to it than anything I had ever been used to and I liked the change. The room had one single divan bed with a lovely floral bedspread and quilted headboard, along with a wardrobe and chest of drawers. Susie had no problem with me adding a small bookcase, but a desk might be difficult due to the lack of space. Fortunately the library was almost directly across the road; that was one big benefit to this small town within the city, it had a little bit of everything almost on your doorstep. I could make good use of the local library for study when I needed some extra space.

After arranging to move into the flat the following Saturday all that remained for me to do was inform Toni of this new development. Knowing she was working at this moment, I would wait

until teatime to tell her. That decision made, I decided to cook her favourite meal, spaghetti bolognaise.

"So what's the occasion?"

"Huh?"

Toni smiled, "I'm just teasing, Shona. You have gone to so much effort to cook my favourite meal and set the table, I thought you might have some news for me."

I wondered if Susie had mentioned something to Eddie, who in turn had already told Toni about the room at Susie's flat.

"Has Eddie already told you?"

Toni stopped, her fork wrapped expertly with spaghetti, suspended in mid air. The inquisitive look she offered me told me she had no idea what I was referring to.

"Told me what?"

I fidgeted nervously with the edge of my napkin while biting my bottom lip, it suddenly struck me that telling Toni was not going to be easy.

She carefully placed her forkful of spaghetti back onto her plate. Stilling my fidgeting fingers she said, "Whatever it is, Shona, you can tell me."

I licked my lips nervously. "Susie has a spare room in her flat that she is looking to rent."

I felt Toni's hand grip mine a little tighter, before easing up again.

"I see."

I carried on in a rush, not wanting to prolong this moment any longer than necessary. "I went to look at it today and arranged to move in next weekend."

Toni released my hand and sat back in her seat, a slightly stunned look on her face.

"I see."

I thought perhaps that I had just made a mistake. When Toni had so generously offered for me to stay at her flat, the agreement was that I would be there until I could find a place to rent. Things had of course changed since my return to Edinburgh. Toni and I were now a couple and in this last week, our relationship had moved to a physical level. I had spent an uncertain week in the flat. Not knowing where Toni had wanted or expected me to sleep each night. Toni had said to me that I could share her bed and that didn't mean we had to make love every night. I had been left wondering if that meant she didn't want me every night, but whenever I touched her she

responded immediately.

"I've done the wrong thing?" I asked, the uncertainty of my actions more than apparent in my voice.

Toni smiled, though it looked a little forced to me. "No, Shona, you have done exactly what you said you would."

I felt tears begin prick my eyes,

"So, I can help you move in if you like. I'm sure the Nova would be up to it."

I appreciated Toni's attempts to change the mood, but I was really going to miss being here.

With my move imminent from Toni's I had only a few days to organise myself. In truth there wasn't too much for me to pack, it wouldn't be that difficult, especially with Toni driving. My books were already stacked in a box, so it was just a case of packing up my clothes, which were currently sharing Toni's wardrobe and drawers. I looked forlornly around the sitting room. I was really going to miss this place, especially the beautiful view of the harbour and being surrounded by Toni's things. I glanced at the coffee table where the current edition of *Melody Maker* sat. Toni always got a copy. When I once picked up a copy of *Smash Hits*, she threatened to throw it in the bin, claiming it was commercial trash. I know she was kidding about throwing it in the bin, but she was very serious about the magazine, but I liked getting the song lyrics to all the latest hits.

More than anything, I was going to miss the time I spent here with Toni. Whether it was sitting late at night drinking tea and eating biscuits after she finished work, or just watching her move around her flat, getting ready for work. I think both Toni and myself were sad about my stay at the flat coming to an end, but I believed it was the right thing to do. I had accepted Toni's generosity with the promise that I would find somewhere to stay. I had fulfilled that promise and despite the change in the nature of my relationship with Toni, I didn't believe it would be right to continue to live with her.

I had a few shifts that week at *The Fern*, I wasn't complaining I really needed to earn as much as I could. I would now be paying rent and bills and with university starting in less than three weeks, I needed to purchase books for my second year studies. I had managed to save a good amount of money over the summer but, when university started, I wouldn't be able to work as much. Letting my studies suffer was not an option. Jimmy had already discussed set work evenings for me; they would be Monday, Friday and Saturday. That meant no more Monday evenings with Toni, I was really going to miss them, but I would welcome not working on a Sunday night. I had always found that difficult since I started my week on Monday mornings. I

was very much looking forward to being able to relax on Sundays. All this meant that I would have very little time to see Toni. Tuesday and Thursday were her evenings off, but I also had to study during the week. This was going to be difficult for us.

Saturday morning saw both Toni and myself up bright and early. She had to be in work for 10.30am, so we had to start moving my belongings before 9am. It was only going to take one journey; that was the good news. The bad news was the stairs on either end of the journey. In no time we had the Nova loaded up and ready to go. The journey to Susie's took a little over 10 minutes and before I knew it Toni had pulled up in front of the Chinese take-away with her hazards on. The stair door opened and out popped Eddie, Toni laughed when he appeared at the car, saying something about '*guess who got lucky last night.*' Within minutes the two of them had all my belongings in Susie's flat. Toni went off to park her car and then the four of us sat down to a late breakfast of sausage, bacon and eggs, cooked by Susie.

Toni headed off to work and I got down to the task of unpacking and generally settling in. I think I was going to enjoy staying at Susie's.

After two weeks, Susie and I had settled into a comfortable routine. We both liked to cook, so if we were both going to be around for dinner, we took turns cooking it. Susie had introduced me to two of her weekly rituals, the first being *Top of the Pops*, which was on television every Thursday evening. I loved watching the bands play live in the studio and I also liked when they showed the videos. Susie's second weekly ritual was to listen to the *BBC Radio One Chart Show*, where the week's Top Forty singles would be played. This lasted between 4pm and 7pm, ending with the new top selling single in the UK. I was really enjoying the Sunday afternoons with Susie, relaxing, cooking and chatting about our week while we listened to all the songs on the radio. Susie had also introduced me to the wonder that was the Video recorder. It was simply amazing! She had shown me how to use it and given me a blank tape to record any TV shows that I liked. Now I would never have to miss any *Eastenders* ever again. It also played movies that could be rented from the local video shop. It turns out though that recording using the timer was a little more complex and I spent an entire afternoon with the instruction booklet working out how to set the video to record shows. Susie was very grateful, as it turns out she had yet to grasp the specifics of that feature and I was now setting the machine to record her shows along with my own.

Tomorrow would be my first day back at university and I could feel the anticipation building, my fingers itching to get at my books. It was hard to believe that it had only been a year since I first arrived in the city. So much had changed for me in those twelve months that it felt more like a lifetime ago. My mind went back to that Saturday a year ago when I first arrived on Mrs. Ramsay's doorstep. I had been so naïve, so timid, completely overwhelmed by everything around me. Now I was independent, working, living in a flat and paying my own way. Everything changed for me that fateful afternoon after college when I decided to get off the bus a stop early.

It took me to the *Railway Club* and eventually into the arms of a wonderful woman, who at this very moment I was missing like crazy. Now I had all the things I desired for the coming year, my one major regret was not being able to go home and visit my family for Christmas. It seemed that everything in life came at a price.

Still, I didn't get too despondent, tomorrow I would be back doing what I loved most, studying history. I would also be catching up with friends I hadn't seen in months. There was always a buzz around the university at the start of each term; a vibrancy and enthusiasm unparalleled throughout the rest of the weeks when the pressure of study and exams would mount.

The evening after my first full day back at university found me working in *The Fern*. My knowledge of history had unexpectedly put me in demand on Monday evenings. *The Fern* held a quiz every Monday night, when one of the regulars, Gerry, would organise and compose the questions, with the winning team being given £10.

The quiz was proving to be a success, particularly in terms of attracting more customers on what was normally the quietest night of the week. Though working, Jimmy had no objections to me taking part. I could serve and answer at the same time if need be. I was in a team with Susie, Eddie and a friend of Susie's from work, Laura. I really wished Toni could be there, but Monday was always her night behind the bar of the *Railwaymen's Club*.

Susie had joked that we would never be able to double date, as Eddie and Toni could never have the same night off. I had mentioned this to Toni and she said that she would come up with a solution. When I questioned how that was possible, she just winked and told me to leave it to her.

It transpired that Gerry had a bit of a passion for history, which meant that his questions leaned more frequently in that direction. Though Scottish history was my particular passion, I tended to absorb any historical information that came my way.

"In what year was the battle of Bannockburn?"

"Oh, that's easy, 1066."

I overheard this answer from the next table, as did Eddie who started to write it down. I stilled his hand, then took the pen from him and wrote 1314. Explaining quietly that it was common to mix up the date with the battle of Hastings, which was indeed 1066.

The quiz continued and I moved easily between the bar and our table, answering questions and serving customers in the breaks.

"What is the literal translation for the Gaelic phrase '*uisge beatha*'?"

This was the final question. Eddie, Susie and Laura looked hopefully towards me; I took the pen and wrote down the answer, '*Water of life*'. Explaining quietly that it was the Gaelic for whisky. We had been doing pretty well with the quiz. Eddie was great at the sport questions, while Susie and Laura were good with music, general knowledge and current affairs. When everyone was finished writing down their answers all the tables passed on their question sheet to the next for marking.

Gerry read out the answer to the final question.

"And finally, the Gaelic translation for '*uisge beatha*' is whisky. Alright ladies and gentlemen if you can hand me the papers I'll let you know who the winners are."

All eyes at the table turned to me. I simply shrugged, I knew I had answered correctly, but Gerry had gotten his answers mixed up. Eddie said we would wait until the papers were returned and see what was what.

Gerry handed back all the papers and sure enough, our last answer was marked as being incorrect, our team wasn't best pleased, but we still had no idea who had won the quiz.

"Alright ladies and gentlemen, settle down. Tonight we have a draw."

There were a few groans as Gerry proceeded to read out the scores.

"And finally the winners with thirty eight points each are the Porty Polis and Eddie's Hot Rod's. All teams gave themselves a name and Eddie had chosen ours. It seemed we had tied with the team from the police station and that was fine with me, but not the rest of my team.

"Whoa, hang on there. Stewards enquiry." All eyes looked at Eddie. "The last question is wrong, the answer should be '*water of life*'."

"Naw, Eddie, its whisky. Surely a barman would know that." Gerry joked.

"Shona, tell him."

I felt my cheeks turn red under the sudden spotlight I had been thrust into. Who knew the quiz could be so competitive?

"Yes, Gerry. You asked for a literal translation - so the answer would be '*water of life*'. '*Uisge beatha*', is indeed the name given to whisky, but the translation of the phrase from Gaelic to English is '*water of life*'. Uisge means water and beatha means life."

Jimmy intervened at this point. "Ya bloody edjit, Gerry. If you're going to ask fancy questions at least get the answer right! You're lucky it's Shona and the police, otherwise I could have a fight on my hands!"

I felt really bad for Gerry, the police were protesting that they had given the answer Gerry was

looking for which was correct, so in the interest of fairness I suggested that the winnings be split between the two teams and the draw would stand. That seemed to appease everyone. Well there were a few grumbles from our team, but the police were happy and apparently as Jimmy told me later, that was always a very good thing.

Just before eleven, Toni walked into *The Fern*, instantly bringing a smile to my face. The club closed at 10.30am through the week and she had chased them all out to make it up here before closing. It was great to see her. I was behind the bar helping Jimmy start to clear up for closing. Toni said a quick hello then sat with Eddie, Susie and Laura. In between cleaning behind the bar and returning clean glasses to the shelves I noticed that one of the policewomen had taken a seat beside Toni. I didn't think it was my imagination, they obviously knew each other, but I got the feeling it was more. I knew my jealous streak was rearing its ugly head again and I tried hard to dampen it down, but the woman was looking like she was all but crawling into Toni's lap!

Toni waited to walk me home. I was tired after my first day back at university and then my night behind the bar.

"Would you like to come home with me? I promise to drop you off early in the morning, so you won't be late for uni."

An hour ago I would have welcomed the offer, but something about seeing Toni with that policewoman had soured my mood and sapped my energy.

"I'm tired, Toni, I think I will just go back to the flat."

She looked despondent but she wasn't put off continuing, "I should warn you that Eddie is spending the night with Susie."

I hadn't thought about that and after the last time he stayed over I wasn't going to forget it anytime soon. It seemed that Eddie and Susie were not only noisy, but they had stamina. I remember Toni's face when I told her about last Monday night. I relented and walked with her to the Nova.

We drove most of the way in silence. Toni seemed happy to leave me to my own thoughts while she concentrated on driving. When we got to the flat she decided to find out what was wrong with me.

"Has something happened, Shona?"

"No, I'm just tired." It wasn't the whole truth and I knew Toni deserved better.

"Who was that woman tonight?"

"Ah, Siobhan. She's a policewoman."

"She seemed very friendly."

Toni nodded. "We used to date."

"It looked like she still wanted to."

"She does, but we only went on a few dates and I decided to stop seeing her."

"Just like Amanda?"

My words seemed to sting Toni. She sat back a bit from me. "Yes, I suppose, just like Amanda," she answered quietly.

"And what about me? Am I *just* like Amanda?"

"What? Of course not!"

Toni seemed genuinely shocked at my question.

"Is that what you think?" She added.

"I don't know, I see these woman all around that you have *dated* a few times and I wonder what makes me different?"

"Shona, you are the first woman I have fallen in love with, that's what makes you different." She moved closer before continuing. "I miss you so much since you have left this place. I was happy here before you came, but now that you have gone, it feels so different. Like something is missing."

"I love you too, and I'm so sorry for my jealousy. It's something I have to learn to control."

"I know it's difficult for you. You've never been in this situation before; it's all new to you. But I promise, Shona, what I feel for you is so much more than I have ever felt before for anyone"

Toni held out her hand. "You look tired, will you come to bed?"

I nodded and put my hand in hers. We went to bed and held each other for the rest of the night.

The following Wednesday Toni turned up at the flat just before 5pm. She asked if I was up for a little company, until her shift started at 6.30pm. It was obvious to me that she had things on her mind but having Toni around for any amount of time these days was appealing to me and I

readily agreed to her staying. I would happily listen to her troubles and if I could in any way help with what was troubling her, I would gladly do so.

"Don't cook. I'll pop downstairs and get us some Chinese."

I had yet to try Chinese food and Toni easily read my hesitancy.

"Don't worry, Shona, I will get something you will like. I promise."

Fifteen minutes later I was sampling my very first mouthful of Chinese food. It was heavenly; the smells that wafted from the premises didn't do this culinary delight justice. Toni had selected three dishes. King prawn chow mein, chicken and pineapple, and beef and black bean. There were side dishes of boiled rice, fried rice and prawn crackers. I started off with a hesitant taste of each dish, but within moments I was hooked. Even the black bean sauce, which I initially found overwhelming on my taste buds, turned out to be delightful and I loved the way the prawn crackers seemed to melt on my tongue. I was hooked on Chinese food instantly.

"How are things at work?"

Toni sat back in her chair, rubbing her full stomach as she considered my question.

"Same as always. I run the bar, but the committee are always trying to pull the strings."

She rested her head on the back of the sofa, closing her eyes. "I had an argument with them today because they don't like one of the brewery reps who came to see me."

"Why not?"

"He's from a small family brewery that operates down on the east coast. They are offering much more favourable rates for what is in my opinion a better product than the beer we are currently selling, but they flat out refuse to change."

"Why wouldn't they want to change the beer supplier?"

Toni sighed. "I assume because they are getting a back hander from the current brewery we use."

"Cha reiceadh leid a chearcsan la fhluich!"

"What did you just say?" Toni enquired, a surprised smile on her face.

"They wouldn't sell a hen on a wet day!"

She burst out laughing at my words. "Thanks, Shona, I needed that."

She motioned for me to join her on the sofa. I happily complied with her request. I treasured these precious moments that we manage to steal in amongst our hectic schedules. In less than

thirty minutes, Toni would be back behind the bar and I would be studying.

"How are you and Susie getting along?"

I smiled, "Really well."

"That's good to hear."

"We were chatting the other day about you and Eddie."

"I bet that happens a lot," Toni replied knowingly.

I decided not to rise to the bait. "We were discussing again, how we never get to have a night out with either of you at the weekends."

"It's one of the biggest drawbacks of bar work, little or no nightlife. You work when everyone else gets to play."

I nodded, I was more aware of that than Susie was, since I worked weekends too. It affected her more though because she was the only one out of all of us free at the weekends.

"Maybe we could arrange something for after work sometime?" Susie had pointed out this possibility to me, adding that many nightclubs stayed open until 3am.

Toni didn't take long to consider this. "Sure, leave it with me. I'll talk to Eddie."

"Thanks, Susie will be pleased."

We spent the last few minutes snuggling together on the sofa. Toni gave me a long lingering kiss, which left me wanting more, but she left with a promise of continuing tomorrow evening.

True to her word, Toni had spoken to Eddie and arranged for the four of us to have a night out that Saturday. I was working at *The Fern* till 11pm, so the plan was for Shona to meet me there and we would walk down to the club to meet Toni and Eddie.

"Where do you think they will take us?" I asked Susie.

"I don't know, but I mentioned *Cinderella's* to Eddie a couple of times, so I'm hoping he has taken the hint."

"Is that a night club?"

"Yeah, it's a big place down in Stockbridge. One of the main night clubs."

"So, it's bigger than *Mistys*?"

"Oh, aye, Shona, much bigger. It's really plush, has great lighting. It's also one of the places where you might see someone famous."

Susie had definitely dressed in hope. She had on a new dress she had purchased that afternoon from *Topshop*. I really liked it, and Susie had promised to go shopping with me sometime soon to Princes Street. That would be a new experience.

We entered the *Railwaymen's Club* just after 11pm and popped behind the bar, the shutters already down signifying the end of the night. Eddie told us that Toni was dropping Cath off. I offered to help Eddie with the clearing up, but he just waved it off.

"Henry and I will manage. You two want a drink?"

Susie thought that sounded like a good idea while we waited on Eddie to finish clearing up and Toni to return. We had to stand in the cupboard inside the bar with our drinks, out of the way of the regulars and Committee members still on the premises, finishing up their last drink of the night.

Henry, the glass washer walked past and saw us. He looked a bit more presentable than the last time I had caught sight of him. He still needed a haircut and a shave though.

"What are they doing behind the bar, Eddie?"

"Waiting on me and Toni to finish our shift."

"Nobody is supposed to be served after 11pm."

"Nobody *was* served after 11pm, Henry. I gave them the drinks from the ones I've been bought tonight."

Susie and I stood quietly in the cupboard listening to the verbal exchange between Eddie and Henry.

"I'll have to tell my brother about it."

"You do that, Henry, but in the mean time, you want to finish collecting the glasses? That's what you're paid for after all."

We heard the bar door slam shut then Eddie ducked his head into the cupboard.

"Don't mind him. He has been acting like this for weeks. Because his brother is on the

committee, he is under the false impression that he is the boss around here."

I suddenly got a glimpse of what Eddie and Toni must be going through. I knew it was difficult enough dealing with the committee as they prevented any change or progress, but now they had to deal with the added stress of having Henry working there weekends. He was clearly making the job more difficult.

"You two can grab a seat in the big hall, it's empty now," Eddie said as he opened the shutters to start removing all the glasses that had been left on the bar as folk were leaving.

A few minutes later, Toni returned and they made quick work of clearing out the remaining customers and cleaning up.

"Do you want me to phone you a cab, Henry?" Toni enquired.

"No, if you just give me the money I'll walk out and get one."

"Remember to get a receipt."

"I will. What are you lot up to then?"

Toni looked at him and simply raised an eyebrow.

"Fine, be like that! Where's my drink, we usually get one at the end of the night?"

"Not tonight you don't."

"But I'm entitled to one."

"No, you're not. And just so as you know, I pay for the drinks we all have at the end of the night and tonight, I don't have time to hang around while you drink a pint of export *and* a whisky."

I couldn't believe the way he was talking to Toni, I really didn't like this man one bit. Toni stood and waited him out. After a few seconds he got his jacket and left the bar. Toni followed him to lock the main doors.

Eddie popped his head over the bar to talk to us.

"Do you need a refill, girls?"

Susie glanced at her watch and mouthed, 'no' to me. I agreed.

"No thanks, Eddie, we're fine."

Toni walked back behind the bar.

"Be with you two in a few minutes," she said and with that she pulled the shutter back down, leaving Susie and me alone in the big hall.

We waited a few minutes and still they hadn't come to get us. We could hear them walking back and forth and I did begin to wonder what could be taking them so long.

Susie glanced at her watch again. "This is ridiculous, it's getting on for midnight."

I was about to answer when Eddie popped his head in the door.

"Okay, you can come through now."

Susie and I shared a curious glance before getting up and following Eddie to the small hall. Neither of us was expecting what greeted us inside. Gone was the harsh glare of the overhead lighting. Instead the top half of the hall was bathed in soft light from lots of candles. Two of the tables had been covered with white linen tablecloths. One set for four, with lovely jade green placemats and coasters, complete with champagne flutes. The other had a finger buffet and plates. To one side stood a stainless steel champagne bucket and stand, complete with a bottle of champagne on ice. To say we were speechless was an understatement.

Susie found her voice first. "Oh my God," she whispered.

Toni and Eddie stood smiling at us, each holding a bouquet of flowers and knowing they had done well. I wanted to cry, I was so overwhelmed by the effort they had made.

After flowers, hugs and kisses were exchanged, Toni put on some music and Eddie opened the champagne. We toasted to lasting friendships and a good evening ahead.

"Who knew they could be so romantic?" said Susie. "Honestly, Shona, I think I'm in big trouble here."

I looked at Susie curiously, not quite following her meaning. "Trouble?"

"Yes, with Eddie. I've never fallen for a guy so quickly."

"Ah, I see."

"What about you and Toni?"

"Yes, I love her."

"Does she know?"

"Oh, yes."

"And...?"

"And, what?"

"Does she feel the same way?"

I got a big smile on my face. "Yes, she does."

We sat and watched the pair of them play pool while taunting each other.

"Toni has a cute butt."

"Oh, I know. Not long after I started working here, I noticed it and often got the urge to touch it, especially when she was leaning over the bar."

"How long have you been together?"

"Three months. Although we both knew we liked each other, but it took me a little time to accept and understand my feelings. I never even knew that I liked women till I met Toni."

"I understand. You know, when I seemed shocked that day in the flat when you told me the two of you were together, it was simply because I just didn't expect the news. Not because I have any problem with you and Toni being a couple."

"I know, but I have to admit, it was a little difficult telling you. It's not something I ever expected to be doing. I'm not ashamed of who I am, or of being with Toni, but I do have concerns over how others will react."

"There will always be people who will never accept it and some will let you know that, but remember, it's their problem, not yours. If they want to be judgmental and homophobic, let them. You would just be wasting your breath trying to change their minds. People will either accept you or they won't and that will be tough sometimes, but you will always have your friends to help you through."

I gave Susie a big hug of thanks; she really was turning out to be a great friend, then whistles from the pool table interrupted us.

"Hey, Toni, our girlfriends are getting it on."

Toni looked up from her shot just as our embrace finished.

"Oh, don't stop on my account. People would pay good money to see that."

Susie pulled me in closer and we sat with an arm around each other and continued to watch

them.

"They are just like brother and sister aren't they?" Susie observed.

I nodded, that summed up their relationship pretty well. I supposed that Toni must really miss her brother and in Eddie, she had a very good friend.

"Oh, your fiver is toast, you are never going to pot that black."

Eddie was heckling Toni over their latest game. It did look a very tough shot.

Toni looked intently at the table. "I'll bet you an additional fiver I can pot the black with this shot."

Eddie shook his head. "You're on, no way will you pot that unless it's a fluke."

"Watch and learn."

The black ball was tight on the bottom cushion, about a foot from the pocket, with the cue ball in the middle of the table. Toni sized up the shot then bent down to the table, aiming the cue ball towards the opposite pocket from where the black was.

We all watched in rapt attention as she hit the white and sent it towards the pocket, where it bounced off the outer, then inner jaw, rolled along the bottom cushion where it connected solidly with the black ball and sent it into the pocket. Susie and I clapped wildly, as Toni thrust her pool cue into the air while sporting a cocky grin.

"Yes!"

"Aww, that is unbelievable. What a shot." He put his hand into his pocket and peeled a crisp ten-pound note from a bundle, then handed it to Toni.

"As much as I hate to take your money from you..." she pocketed the tenner. "Thanks very much."

"One more game, double or quits?"

"Sure."

They racked the balls for the final game.

"Is Eddie sure he wants to gamble again?" I mentioned to Susie. "What if Toni wins?"

"Don't worry, Shona, after their good luck on the horses, they can both afford it."

"Horses?"

She nodded, "Yeah, Toni picked an outsider and it romped home at 33-1. They had ten pounds each on it."

"I had no idea."

"How else do you think the pair of them can afford all this? That champagne is expensive; it's not the stuff from the supermarket shelf. The buffet was lovely; they will have paid to have that made too. And the flowers? Shona, they must have spent well over a hundred pounds."

I looked around at everything. Of course it would have taken money to do what they had done for us this evening. I just hadn't considered it. Something was troubling me. I had no idea that Toni bet the horses. Is that something I should have known? Susie did, Eddie obviously told her. Why didn't Toni tell me?

"I'm going to the toilet, be right back."

When I came out of the toilet, Toni was waiting for me in the foyer.

"Are you okay?"

I nodded, and smiled weakly.

"Come here."

Toni pulled me into a warm embrace and she kissed the top of my head, a gesture that was becoming very familiar to me.

"I'm sorry I didn't mention the betting."

"It's okay, you don't have to tell me everything you do."

"No, I should have told you." "Why didn't you?" That was the crux of the matter; I was more bothered about why Toni chose not to tell me, than the gambling itself.

"I think I chose not to tell you because I was a little ashamed."

I frowned and looked at her. "Why would you be ashamed? It's not illegal."

"I know, but you go to church every Sunday, I thought that maybe you wouldn't approve. I don't know, I suppose I just didn't want you to think badly of me."

I nodded. I could see why Toni withheld the information.

"I don't have a problem with you gambling. I assume you're not addicted?" I added hastily.

Toni smiled. "Lots of people can gamble without feeling the urge to bet everything they have. I'm not addicted or a compulsive gambler. It's a hobby and every so often I get lucky."

I thought about something that occasionally nagged in the back of my brain, but I had never given voice to it.

"Remember when you asked me to pour the *Queen Anne* whisky into the *Bell's* bottle?"

Toni nodded. "I do."

"Someone was making money from that. Was it the committee?"

She looked down at the floor. "No, I make money from that."

"I see." I tried not to sound disapproving, but I couldn't help but feel it was wrong.

"Look, Shona, I know I have spoken of the distaste I have for certain practices around here and I genuinely do enjoy the fact that you are nothing like that. I must seem like a hypocrite to you right now. I'm not perfect, Shona. For a good while now I've known my future was in bar work. It's not an easy game to be in, especially in this town. It's big business and I'm guilty of a little skimming."

"These are practices that go on all the time in bars." I said more to myself, getting what Toni was putting across to me. "I understand."

"Do you really?"

"Yes, I really do."

"Is that something that you can accept?"

I considered that for a moment before replying. "It's something that I can tolerate."

"That's good enough for me."

We hugged a little longer before returning to the hall where Eddie and Susie were dancing slowly. We joined them and spent the rest of the night dancing, drinking and chatting into the wee hours of the morning. It wasn't until almost 5am, that we staggered out of the club and all walked back up to the flat.

Chapter 21

"And I read in the local newspaper this week, we are being asked, ladies and gentlemen, to accept impurities. There are murmurs again that we should not only tolerate homosexuality, but indeed accept it. I say never!" The reverend slammed his fist down so heavily on the solid wooden pulpit, I observed the woman in front of me jump. I was attending the regular 10am Sunday service at St Philip's.

"The Bible is our only rule of faith and manners. It condemns homosexuality unreservedly. Sodom and Gomorrah was destroyed for this heinous sin. When the Apostle Paul looked for a sin to demonstrate God's judgment on mankind, it was this very sin that he set upon: *'For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly...'* (Romans 1:26-27) The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ has the power to change lives. In the Lord Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven."

I could see the spittle flying from his mouth with the pure force behind each word.

"When God says we are sinners and guilty, he means we are guilty whether we feel it or not. We have broken his law. We have not acted in love. We have marred his world. We have caused untold hurt and misery. We have *rebelled* against him and broken relationship with him. As a result we are estranged and alienated from him. The wages of sin is death - not just physical death, but spiritual and eternal death."

He finished in a harsh whisper, then paused to let his intense gaze drift over the congregation,

"If you feel the weight of guilt at this moment, perhaps of old sins, perhaps of *current* ones, come to Jesus and find forgiveness and peace with God. There is no sin too great, no stain too deep, and no burden too heavy for Jesus to remove. The Apostle John said, *'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin.'*"

The reverend allowed his gaze to settle directly on me,

"I urge anyone amongst you who may feel temptation, who has *acted* immorally, to seek forgiveness. You can be saved; it's never too late."

I could feel my cheeks burn as he continued to look at me. It was an extremely uncomfortable moment, which felt like it lasted minutes instead of the mere seconds it took until I bowed my head, no longer able to tolerate his piercing stare.

As soon as the sermon was over I headed straight for the shore. There was a strong wind whipping off the sea this Sunday morning and I appreciated the sobering sting it brought to my cheeks. I felt tears begin to form, a combination of the salty wind and my emotional state. Today's sermon had brought to the surface the ambivalence I was currently feeling towards my faith. It was ironic, I continued to attend church faithfully every Sunday, playing the good Christian, but the reality was so very different. I no longer felt a part of the congregation. I now

felt like an outsider. I thought back to the concern the Reverend Halliday had continually expressed the summer before I came to Edinburgh. The constant warnings he had issued about the temptations that lay in wait. I had indulged in all of them - okay the smoking was passive, but the others, sex and alcohol to name but two. On the plus side I wasn't a heroin addict and, after all, I had been told many times that Edinburgh was the 'drugs capital of Europe'. I sometimes wondered if we were so insular that we failed to see beyond ourselves, and the limitations that our religion was putting on us. I knew for a fact that being a heroin addict would be better received back home than my homosexuality. I swiped angrily at my tears as they began to run down my cold cheeks.

"Oh, it's wee, Shona. We miss you at the club, hen."

I looked up to see two members from the *Railwaymen's Club* looking over at me. I was sitting on one of the many benches that were located along the promenade. I didn't recall exactly when I had sat down.

"Morning, Mr. and Mrs. Duncan." I smiled at them; they were a lovely couple, always chatty, and never a bad word to say about anyone.

"What's up lass? You're looking a bit peaky." Mr. Duncan asked sincerely.

I tried to cover my current distress, but failed miserably. "I'm fine, I just fancied a walk."

"Are you homesick, is that it, Shona?"

Mrs. Duncan took a seat beside me on the bench and took my chilled hand in her warm ones. It was my undoing and I sniffled loudly.

"There, there lass you'll be alright. Why don't we walk you to the club to see Toni?"

"That's a good idea, Libby. Toni will cheer her up." Mr. Duncan agreed cheerily.

Before I could form a protest I was being guided to my feet and walking arm in arm with the Duncans towards the club.

The Duncans walked me into the club. I assured them I would be fine, but they insisted on making sure I was safely with Toni before they left me. Mr. Duncan tapped on the bar door and Eddie answered; he took one look at me and immediately turned to get Toni.

"Are you alright?" Toni's concern for me was evident.

I nodded, but it was Mrs. Duncan who answered. "We were taking our usual walk along the prom when we came across Shona, looking upset. I think the poor lassie is homesick."

Toni assured the Duncans that I was in good hands and I thanked them for walking me to the club. With a final squeeze of my arm Mr. and Mrs. Duncan said goodbye and told Toni they would see her that evening.

"Come on." Toni gently led me into the main hall, which wouldn't be in use until that evening. We took a seat just inside the doors. It was dim inside, the only light coming in through the small windows set high up in the walls.

"What has you so troubled?"

"I was at church this morning." Toni nodded, she knew I attended every Sunday.

"Toni, I think the Reverend knows!"

She frowned, not sure what I was referring to.

"About us," I clarified.

"What did he say to you?"

"It was during his sermon. He started talking about homosexuality, how it's a sin. He was using quotes from the bible and talking about how God can forgive you. Then when he addressed the congregation directly, he looked straight at me and said any of us could be saved, it was never too late." My lip started to quiver I was so upset by what had happened.

Toni wrapped me up in her strong arms. "I thought the Church of Scotland were adopting a more lenient approach?"

"They are," I mumbled into her shoulder. "But I'm a member of the Free Church of Scotland."

Toni leaned back to look at me. "You're a 'wee free'?" The surprise in her voice was evident.

I nodded; it was something I had never discussed with her.

She frowned, "I had no idea."

"It just never came up."

"What's the difference? I know you were all Church of Scotland at one time."

"Yes, that's right. The split happened in 1843, when many ministers broke away from the Church of Scotland because of its relationship with the state. Basically the ministers who left disagreed over the way the state was able to have a say in how the church governed itself. So they broke away and became the Free Church of Scotland and maintained the right to govern their own spiritual affairs."

Toni considered that information. "Then why do they have the reputation of being..."

She searched for a word, probably a diplomatic one. "Puritanical?" I offered.

She shrugged.

"It's okay, because it's true." I offered a little smile, "Basically the Free Church has adhered more strictly to the bible. It doesn't move with the times."

"Then why keep going to worship there?"

I sighed, "That's a very good question. I believe in God, Toni. I could try to find a new church, one that is a little more liberal."

"What if there was one that was very liberal?"

I wasn't entirely certain what that would entail, or if it were even possible. "How do you mean?"

"There are other people in this city who are homosexual and believe in God. They have their own congregation."

I had never even considered that such a thing could exist. I can honestly say I was shocked. "Really? There is a gay church?"

Toni smiled, "Yes, really. Though I don't think that's its advertising slogan." We shared a smile at her joke. "You could go along and see if you liked it."

I nodded, "When and where do they congregate?"

"It's in the centre of town, I'm not exactly sure when and where, well it's definitely a Sunday. I'll find out for you. - And, maybe, the first time you go anyway, I could accompany you - until you get settled."

I threw my arms around Toni and hugged her for all I was worth.

Chapter 22

Getting off the bus after finishing uni the following Wednesday, I decided to walk down to the club and meet Toni. Her afternoon shift would just be coming to an end. She had been coming up to Susie's flat between her shifts on Wednesdays so that we could share some time together. I would cook for her and then she would go back to the club for her evening shift.

The weather was really starting to change with autumn quickly morphing into winter. The second I turned the corner off the high street, I was hit by a stiff easterly wind that was blowing

right off the sea, funnelling up the street leading down the to the club and seafront. Closing the top button of my jacket, I picked up my pace.

Though just after four, the door remained unlocked, that meant Toni still had customers finishing up their drinks.

I knocked lightly on the bar door. Toni answered it with a look of mild exasperation on her face, which much to my delight, quickly turned into a full-blown smile upon seeing me.

"Well this is a pleasant surprise. Come on in."

She ushered me behind the bar where she was obviously in the middle of clearing up the remainder of the dirty glasses from that afternoon.

"I thought I would pop in to see you." I added coyly. "I miss you."

"I miss you too." Toni gave me a quick peck on the lips. "You're cold, go pop the kettle on, get some hot tea in you."

I did as instructed, putting my jacket and bag into the cupboard on the way. I made us both a cup of tea, no sugar, Toni always joked that I was sweet enough. I heard Toni saying goodbye to her last customers, before following them to lock the front doors. I was waiting for her, tea in hand when she returned to the bar.

I took a grateful sip of my hot drink; it served to heat both my hands at the same time as causing a shiver of approval to course through my body. I watched as Toni finished washing the last two glasses, and then set them on the drip tray.

She took a sip of her tea, adding a "Thanks," as she sighed contentedly, able to fully relax now that everything was done. I knew that she usually stayed a little later on Wednesday afternoons, but today she seemed content to spend this time with me.

"Fancy a game of play pool?"

I was momentarily surprised by the request, but found myself readily agreeing.

We took our mugs of tea to the small hall, where Toni popped a couple of coins in the slots of the pool table and racked the balls.

We leisurely made our way through a game, with Toni assisting and guiding me, while making the game fun for herself by attempting and making some satisfying pots. Finally it was a black ball game, I wasn't fool enough to believe I merited being so close, but it was fun regardless.

"Mmm, come here you." Toni put her arms around my waist and pulled me back towards her as I was bending over the table, lining up my shot. She nuzzled my neck, and then sucked on my earlobe. I could feel her slowly grind her pelvis into my backside. She had such an effect on me I

was already wet. Dropping the pool cue, I put my hands back to caress her thighs. I could feel the strong muscles move under my fingers as she moved against me.

"You want to take your shot?" she whispered huskily in my ear.

It wasn't what I expected to hear. I pulled out of Toni's embrace and looked at her curiously. She raised her eyebrow in question, a wicked smile gracing her beautiful face. She pulled me to her and kissed me passionately. I was breathless when she ended the kiss and certainly in no condition to play pool!

"Stay right there," she pointed to the spot I was standing in. "I'll be right back." She headed behind the bar and left me standing next to the pool table, very aroused and very confused. Toni came back into the hall, a travel blanket in her hand and before I could even ask, she had promptly spread it out on top of the pool table. I realised that I was finally catching on.

"I have wanted you all day." Toni said as she pulled me to her again. "Now where were we?" Oh yes, we were right here, I thought as she captured my lips again.

Toni manoeuvred me until my bottom was pressed against the edge of the pool table. She grasped my buttocks and massaged them firmly with her long fingers. She had great hands. I gasped when I was suddenly lifted onto the edge of the pool table. Toni stood between my parted legs and continued to kiss me long and hard. I felt her hands move over the silk of my blouse to cup my breasts. I was happy to let Toni take me wherever she wanted to go. She moved her mouth to my neck as she started to slide the buttons of my blouse open, gradually exposing more of my flesh to her eager mouth.

"I love front fastening bras," she mumbled while nuzzling between my breasts, and then proceeded to demonstrate just why she loved the garment. I felt the cool air on my bare skin and then Toni's mouth was covering one of my breasts, I gasped at the sensation. I really enjoyed having Toni's mouth on my breasts, sucking on my nipples. I pulled her head closer, offering more encouragement. She switched to the other breast and whilst continuing to squeeze the neglected nipple between her fingers.

"I love the way you feel," Toni whispered as she lifted me to a standing position. Moving her hands down to the waistband of my trousers, she deftly opened the top button, sliding the zip down slowly. I felt her warm hands move inside the waistband and she slowly slid my trousers and panties down my legs. She then effortlessly lifted me back on top of the pool table, now covered with the blanket, and continued to remove my shoes and socks along with the trousers and panties that had bunched at my knees. Toni ran her hands over my calves and up the outside of my thighs repeatedly. It was the most exquisite torture. I loved the way she could take her time with me, she seemed to know what my body needed before I did. As Toni moved her mouth down over my stomach, I felt myself sink back onto the blanket. Toni's hands moved to caress the inside of my thighs and my hips jerked towards her. I reached blindly for her head, hoping to encourage her to move more quickly to where I needed her most. I couldn't wait any longer.

"Please, Toni," I heard myself rasp. "Ohhh!" Then she was there, her lips and tongue on me, in

me. Taking me to a place I knew I would never get enough of. I could hear Toni's moans of pleasure mingle with my own. She removed her tongue from inside me and started to lick and suck my clitoris. I would never have believed until recently that anything could feel this good. Toni increased the pressure of her tongue and I felt myself slipping over the edge, screaming out my release, which echoed in the empty hall. I lay there my legs dangling limply over the side of the pool table, my hand carelessly playing with Toni's hair, as her head remained on my thigh. I could feel her breath, each exhale caressing my skin and leaving a tingling sensation.

We never did finish the game. It was almost six when Toni checked her watch. She began hastily tucking in her shirt and instructing me to do likewise.

"What's the rush, Toni?"

"I forgot the committee are arriving tonight at 6pm. They are having a meeting about something or other."

She began to fold the travel blanket. "Sorry to rush you. I was having so much fun it completely slipped my mind." She offered me a quick smile.

I hastily dressed, then grabbed our empty teacups and followed Toni behind the bar.

"You haven't had anything to eat."

"I'll manage. I think I put on a little weight during the summer anyway, with all the good meals you cooked for me."

"I don't think so, Toni Martin." I pinched her butt for effect and she gave a little yelp. "I'm going to pop to the chip shop and get you something. I'll be back in a few minutes."

I grabbed my jacket and purse and Toni followed me to open the door, telling me it would be left open for me to return.

When I got back, Toni was nowhere to be seen, but I could hear voices coming from the committee room. I went behind the bar and put the kettle on. Putting Toni's chips onto a plate, I readied a mug for tea.

Five minutes later I watched Toni storm out of the committee room, the raised voices had brought me out into the main foyer. Mr. Bain came out of the room after her, shouting that '*she would do as she was damn well told*'. Red in the face, he struggled to make up the ground between them as Toni's long strides brought her closer to me at the bar door. I looked on in horror as Mr. Bain clutched at his chest and slumped to the floor.

"Toni!" I screamed and pointed behind her. She briefly gave me a puzzled look before spinning round to see the man lying unmoving on the floor of the foyer. She quickly sprang into action as

chaos ensued around her. My scream had brought the rest of the committee out of their hidey-hole.

Toni crouched down beside Mr. Bain putting her fingers to his neck to feel for a pulse.

"Christ! Shona, call an ambulance, he's not breathing," Toni instructed as she barked orders at the others to move back and give her some room to work.

I grabbed the phone from its cradle on the wall and dialled 999 as quickly as I could.

"Operator, which service do you require?" said the calm voice on the other end of the line.

"Ambulance!" I practically screamed into the receiver. "He's not breathing."

"What's the address?"

I told her the club's address then proceeded to beg her to hurry, while I looked on in horror as Toni breathed air into Mr. Bain's lungs.

I hung up the phone as the operator informed me that the ambulance was on its way. The next few minutes were the longest in my life to date. I watched on numbly as Toni continued to work tirelessly at trying to keep Mr. Bain alive. She was counting out as she compressed his chest, then she would breathe more air into his lungs. It seemed to go on for hours, but in truth, it was only minutes. I could hear a siren approaching, thank goodness help was almost here. Before the ambulance got to the club Toni looked up at me, her blue eyes intense and focussed, her hair mussed and sweat running down from her forehead.

"He's breathing," she rasped, as she manoeuvred Mr. Bain into the recovery position. She looked back down at the prone pale figure and continued to monitor him until the ambulance crew arrived, less than a minute later.

Toni moved back wearily from the scene as the paramedics worked on Mr. Bain. Sitting on one of the chairs in the foyer and looking at the floor, she seemed to be in a daze. I rubbed her shoulder and she barely responded to my touch.

Heading behind the bar, I poured a glass of water before taking it back to Toni, who was in the exact same position I had left her in just moments ago. She barely nodded her thanks as I put the glass down on the small table in front of her. I watched her hands tremble as she lifted the glass towards her mouth; she took a few sips then leaned her head back against the wall closing her eyes. I stood beside her silently watching, unsure what to do next. Nobody was saying much as the paramedics wheeled Mr. Bain towards the exit.

One of the committee, Mr. Peters, broke the silence.

"Aye, I don't know about the rest of ye', but a' could do with a good stiff drink to settle the nerves."

There were a few murmurs of approval, which were quickly silenced when Toni spoke aloud for the first time, her voice as cold and harsh as the snow-capped peak of Ben Nevis.

"Don't you *gentlemen* think it would be appropriate to call his wife first?"

"Oh, aye, of course we'll phone Ella. Let her know that Fred is on his way to the hospital after taking a wee turn."

"A wee turn! Jesus Christ, the man wasn't breathing!" Toni stared icily at the remaining committee members, "You are nothing but a bunch of piranhas whose sole interest is to swallow as much free alcohol as you can get and line your own pockets in the process. You don't even care that your colleague, a man that you all spend more time with than your own wives, might not live to see tomorrow."

Toni stood up so fast that the chair she had been sitting on hit the wall. Before it settled back into place, she was out the front door, leaving everyone gaping in the direction she had just exited.

"I'll make that phone call then, eh?" Said Mr. Peters.

The rest of them shuffled through to the small hall. I had no idea what to do. Toni had stormed off to goodness knows where. I decided to grab my jacket from behind the bar and head home to the flat to await news of her.

"Ah, Shona, lass, I wonder if you could help us out a little. We seem to be in a bit of a spot, what with Toni running off. We don't have anyone to serve behind the bar until Eddie gets here."

In that moment I really wanted to tell Mr. Auld to go...somewhere! I was so mad. Unfortunately my manners got the better of me so I took a deep breath, smiled politely and asked him what the round was.

Eddie arrived a few minutes later, but before I had a chance to tell him what had happened, Mr. Auld decided to get there first. Eddie gave me a strangely curious look then, proceeded to listen to Mr. Auld describe the events of less than thirty minutes earlier.

"...So you see, Edward. We don't know where she is, or if she is coming back tonight. I think it might be guilt that drove her off. I mean she had just argued with Bill moments before he collapsed."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. The man was actually saying that it was all Toni's fault, not even mentioning how she resuscitated him! I was so mad in that moment I felt like I would explode. Toni was right, these people didn't even care about each other, I felt sick.

"I know it's a busy night, perhaps young Shona, could stick around and help you out till Toni gets back?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Auld, Shona works at *The Fern*, so she won't be able to do that."

I wondered why Eddie was refusing my help without asking me first. I continued to listen as Mr. Auld said that Henry could probably help out tonight, he would be coming in anyway for a drink. I watched as the ladies started to arrive for their bingo, I decided I couldn't just let them queue up at the bar and was about to start serving them when Eddie took hold of my arm and guided me into the cupboard.

"Be with you in a moment ladies."

There were a few moans and groans but Eddie didn't respond.

"What he told you Eddie isn't exactly what happened." I began to explain.

"That's okay, Shona. I take what they say with a pinch of salt and wait till I get the truth from Toni. Forget about them. Do you know the Daisy Park?"

"Huh?" I was completely confused by his question.

"It's probably where Toni is." He explained. "It's not far from here. You know the swimming baths?"

I nodded, "Yes, I swim there."

"Right, go straight along the prom, walk past the baths then, take the first right. It will take you straight up to the Daisy Park, it will be on your left."

"And that's where I will find Toni?"

"I'm 99% sure of it. Look, I have to serve the vultures, don't worry about anything here, it isn't your concern, Toni is." Eddie smiled at me and gave me a quick hug. "I'll see you later."

He went off to serve the customers and I once again reached for my jacket. I noticed Toni's denim one still hanging in the cupboard, so I took it with me. I made my way hurriedly down to the prom, the cold wind from earlier now spattered through with rain. I'm sure I could have cut along behind the promenade, but with my terrible sense of direction I thought it was safest to follow Eddie's directions to the letter. The wind was picking up and coming in off the sea, driving the rain against me. I shivered a little as I burrowed into my jacket trying to find some extra warmth. It was now dark, the nights drawing in fast. I picked up my pace to jog and hoped that I would find Toni where Eddie said.

I saw a lone figure in the park, sitting silently and still amongst the greenery, looking serene and oblivious to the winter weather. I slowly approached her.

"Ahh, Shona, you found my secret place - Eddie tell you?"

I nodded. She was sitting on one of the park benches, her dark hair plastered against her face, her white cotton shirt soaked through.

"Toni, you must be cold, come on, put on your jacket?" I held the faded denim out to her, but she refused.

Shrugging she said, "I can't feel a thing." Holding up an almost empty half bottle of whisky she continued, "Good for all that ails you, keeps you warm too - go on have a taste, you're shivering." She took her denim jacket from me and laid it on the bench beside her, then motioned for me to sit.

Taking a seat I accepted the offered bottle, figuring if I could drink the remainder of the whisky that meant no more for Toni. I took the remaining liquid into my mouth and swallowed in one gulp. I instantly felt the trail of fire burn all the way down to my belly, my eyes watering in sympathy.

Toni laughed and slapped my back. "Breathe, Shona, you'll be fine in a moment."

"Tha..." I could hardly find my voice, so I swallowed and tried again. "That's what whisky tastes like?" I husked. "I can't believe it's so popular."

Toni smiled, "You get used to it after a few swigs, it kind of numbs the tongue. I enjoy the sensation and there is nothing better for a day like today."

She took the bottle from me and drained the very last dregs from the bottom of it.

"This was my favourite place to come with my mum. I always come visit when I'm missing her most."

Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. She looked so forlorn and fragile in that moment, I was at a loss as to how to help her, but getting us both out of this bad weather was a priority.

"Will you come home with me to Susie's flat?"

Toni looked at me, her eyes glassy and unfocussed. "I would go anywhere with you, Shona."

She stood on slightly wobbly legs, swaying a little until she got her balance. Screwing the lid back onto the empty whisky bottle, Toni took her time to focus on carefully depositing the bottle into the bin.

"I don't like litter." She muttered distastefully.

I took her hand and we made our way along the prom. The wind and rain not letting up, I stopped to insist that Toni put on her denim jacket. I held it out while she put her arms into the jacket sleeves, not bothering to look at what she was doing, trusting that they would get there somehow.

She looked out to sea, there was nothing but inky black all the way across to Fife, where a smattering of lights dotted the next chunk of land.

"At times like this I fucking hate this place." She turned around and motioned to all of Portobello. "Look at it - it's so fake, run down, tainted."

She shook her head, then looked at me, "but then there is you, so pure, so true, so trusting. You are my little ray of sunshine on these dark bleak days." She ran a warm hand through my wet curls.

Toni's words were heartfelt and I knew she wasn't simply referring to the weather.

"I think I'm out of a job." She sniggered, "Those bastards are probably telling everyone who will listen that I tried to kill Bill Bain, the daft old bugger shouldn't have been trying to run after me while he was so worked up."

I couldn't disagree with Toni's observations. From what I had seen already, I wouldn't be surprised if they claimed Toni was attempting to suck the very life out of Mr. Bain, when she was keeping him alive with her own breath.

"What was the argument about?"

"They want me to reduce Cath's hours so Henry can work more."

"That's terrible!" I proclaimed. No wonder Toni had refused. "What will you do if they sack you?"

Toni smiled. "Don't worry about me, Shona, I was never intending to be behind that bar indefinitely. I will just have to move my plans forward a bit."

We were almost at the flat now and I was frozen. Toni was right; the whisky did seem to have rendered her immune to the cold, for now anyway.

"My goodness, look at the pair of you?" Susie exclaimed. "You're both soaked through!"

"Hiya, Susie. I've just lost my job," Toni informed her, as though chatting about the weather.

Clearly picking up on Toni's inebriated state, Susie looked to me for confirmation.

"Well, not officially, yet anyway. There was an incident at the club this evening. I'll tell you all about it later. Right now I have to get the both of us out of these wet clothes."

"Of course, Shona. I'll pop the kettle on, leave all the wet clothing outside in the hall and I'll put it in the machine."

"Thanks, Susie," I called over my shoulder, as I led Toni to my bedroom. Once there I started to remove Toni's clothing. She was extremely compliant, if a little subdued. As she stepped out of her wet jeans I handed her a large fluffy bath towel. I had myself stripped in under a minute and grabbed all our wet clothing to leave in the hall before leading Toni to the bathroom.

The hot water from the shower felt wonderful on my chilled skin. Toni didn't seem to notice or react to the change as she docilely allowed me to wash her hair and body.

After drying us off with a little help from Toni, she left the bathroom and promptly padded stark naked past a startled Susie. I chased behind her wrapped in my towel and offered an apologetic smile to her.

"I left two mugs of tea in your bedroom."

"Thanks."

"Ahem, does Toni have anything to wear?"

"I was going to rummage around, but I doubt I have anything that will cover her up."

"I have a tee-shirt and boxers belonging to Eddie, I'll go get them."

I entered my bedroom to find Toni spread-eagled and gloriously naked on my single bed, her feet dangling off the bottom. She was sound asleep on top of the duvet. I grabbed a blanket to cover her, dropping on a kiss on her forehead. "*Dean cadalan samhach, a chuilean mo ruin.*" Sleep softly my darling beloved.

I put on my robe and made my way through to the sitting room.

"That woman has no modesty." Susie stated.

"I know, she is very comfortable with her own body."

"Can't say I blame her. I mean don't get me wrong, Shona, I'm a straight woman, but that is one gorgeous hunk of female you have there."

I giggled, a little embarrassed, but I couldn't disagree.

"So what happened?"

"Like I said there was an incident at the club this evening. Toni had an argument with a member of the committee; he then chased after her and collapsed. He stopped breathing, Susie, and Toni resuscitated him while I called for an ambulance. She has probably saved his life, but it seems more likely she will be blamed for the incident."

"So will she be sacked?"

"I'm not sure, but Toni seems to think so."

"My God. I can't believe it."

"I know. She stormed off in disgust after Mr. Bain was taken away in the ambulance and the rest of the committee members seemed more interested in getting a drink than in even letting Mr. Bain's wife know what had happened to him. Eddie told me where I could find her."

"Where was she?"

"Sitting in the Daisy Park drinking whisky in the pouring rain."

"What is she going to do?"

"She says not to worry about her."

"Well, it's not difficult to get bar work in this town, that's for sure."

I nodded as I sipped my hot drink, finally beginning to feel some warmth seeping back into my chilled bones.

After finishing my drink, I took the boxers and tee shirt that Susie had given me and returned to my bedroom. Toni was still sprawled across my bed and I briefly wondered where I would sleep tonight. There was currently no room for me. I sat down in my chair and attempted to fit in some study time.

"Hey."

I looked over to see Toni awake. She sat up in bed revealing her naked torso. Frowning at her state of undress, she looked at me accusingly.

"I have no clothes on?"

I think she was still a little drunk. I picked up Eddie's clothing and took it over to her.

"Here, put these on."

"Are these Eddie's?" she asked while sniffing gingerly at the garments.

"Yes, Susie assures me they are clean."

She put the clothes. "What time is it?" Toni was rubbing her head and I wondered if she was suffering from a hangover.

"A little after ten. Would you like some coffee?"

She continued to rub her head while frowning. "If you wouldn't mind, I would love a cup."

"I'll be right back."

Susie was still awake in the living room.

"How is everything?"

"I think Toni has a hangover, I'm just going to make some coffee, would you like some?"

"Sure, I'm staying up waiting for Eddie. I'm sure he will be able to give us an update from the club when he gets here."

"I'll let Toni know he's coming."

"Her clothes are dry and I ironed them so she has something to wear tomorrow."

"Oh, thanks very much, Susie. I'm sure she will be grateful."

"No need for thanks, it's what friends are for."

Eddie arrived within the hour and informed Toni that Fred Bain was in a stable condition in hospital. He also said that the remaining committee members were telling anyone who would listen that Toni was going to be sacked and would also be permanently banned from the premises. A fate reserved for only the worst of offenders apparently, though I don't think that concerned Toni at all judging by the way she that mocked it.

"I'll beat them to the punch. First thing tomorrow morning I will hand in my notice with immediate effect and rescind my membership. It's not right that bar staff have to become members of the place anyway. Like I care about having that privilege taken away from me. I'll accompany you there tomorrow morning, Eddie, and hand in my keys and written notice. I won't give them the satisfaction of parading me through the club first, then sacking me for dramatic effect at one of their hearings."

With that decision made we all headed off for bed. Toni and I arranged our bodies as best we could in my single bed. It was a tight fit, but I wasn't complaining.

Monday was the day I least enjoyed out of my week. I started my college day with a busy schedule and barely had time to get home and have dinner before my shift at *The Fern* began. I wearily made my way up the winding stairwell to Susie's flat, I could really do without work tonight, but I was sure after I had a bite to eat I would feel revived.

"Oh, my God, Shona, the news is all over Porty!" An anxious Susie informed me as soon as I opened the door. "I heard it several times in the bank and I still can't believe it."

I had no idea what she was talking about. "What news?"

"Toni and Eddie have been arrested."

"What!" I exclaimed as my rucksack hit the floor with a resounding thud.

Susie nodded. "Last night sometime after the *Railway Club* closed, the safe was robbed, all the weekend takings gone. They are usually banked on a Monday morning."

I was confused this just wasn't making any sense. "But why would they arrest Toni and Eddie?"

"It was an inside job, no sign of any forced entry, so the person who robbed the safe had a full set of keys."

I nodded beginning to understand a little more, but it still wasn't making a whole lot of sense to me. "Toni doesn't even have keys anymore, she handed hers in last Thursday."

Susie nodded, "I know, but since it was common knowledge that she was about to be sacked it seems the finger of blame is being pointed at her."

"So why has Eddie been arrested?"

"Well if Toni were to pull this off she would have needed a set of keys..."

Susie let that information sink in. "So they are claiming Eddie let her have his? I can't believe this, Susie. They wouldn't do that."

"I'm sure they will be out later this evening, then we can hear all about it first hand, instead of the second hand information I've been receiving all day."

I nodded, feeling numb. I didn't think for one minute that Eddie and Toni had conspired to steal the money, but what if the police didn't believe that? Back home on North Uist we had rarely had any need for a police officer, as there was little to no crime on the island. Most of the crimes were committed by tourists and usually involve offences under the wildlife and countryside act, usually for stealing rare bird's eggs. A robbery? My goodness!

I attempted to eat a sandwich, but had lost my appetite. I gave up on food, instead getting ready

for work. Before I left, Susie promised to pop into *The Fern* if there was any news.

When I arrived at *The Fern*, Jimmy was there, looking concerned.

"I wasn't sure if you were going to make it in tonight. Are you up to a shift behind the bar?"

I nodded; Jimmy was a nice man, who had shown me nothing but kindness and respect since I started to work for him.

He motioned with his head towards the bar. "Go on then, but I'll be keeping an eye on you."

I nodded again, unable to find my voice; his concern for me was fast becoming my undoing.

"And, Shona..."

"Yes?" I croaked.

"They will both be out before you know it. Nothing will come of this."

I smiled tremulously. "Thanks, Jimmy."

He gave me a pat on the shoulder. "Toni and Eddie are good people, we know that, right?"

I nodded once more, before heading behind the bar to start my shift. I really did appreciate his support. Toni really had chosen well when she suggested I work here.

As the evening wore on, I was sure I hadn't been imagining the inquisitive looks that were being thrown my way. Though it was quiz night there was an underlying mood to the event. People seemed distracted. As the bar had filled up prior to the start of the quiz, you could sense the murmurs going around the place. I had witnessed this type of thing many times at the *Railwaymen's Club*, particularly if there had been a death of a regular. I attempted to ignore the whispers and the looks, but it was becoming increasingly difficult, some comments were just impossible to miss.

"See Toni Martin and Eddie Robertson have been fingered for the safe job."

"Aye, so I've been hearing. Mind you, as thick as thieves that pair. I'm no' surprised."

"Well, with Toni being sacked last week, seems obvious she helped herself."

I was so mad, these men were sitting at the bar having this conversation, I couldn't hold my tongue any longer.

"Toni was not sacked - she resigned and she handed in her keys last week."

"It's easy to get keys cut, hen, and from what I heard Toni was about to be sacked after she nearly killed Bill Bain."

The way the men looked at me only served to infuriate me more. I knew what they thought; that I was young and naïve and had a lot to learn. Well all that may have been true, but I was not going to stand there and listen to them talking as though Toni and Eddie had already been found guilty.

"She saved his life!"

The bar went suddenly quiet. The two men who had been chatting developed an interest in what was in their glasses, but almost everyone else was looking my way.

Jimmy led me away from the bar.

"They aren't interested in the facts, Shona, just the gossip. You get yourself home. You've had more than enough for one evening."

Jimmy helped me with my coat, and walked me to the door. The looks he threw the way of those following my progress had them suddenly finding an interest in the pictures on the wall.

Nathairs!

Instead of going straight home I walked past the stair door to the flat and along to the police station. There was a middle-aged man in uniform behind the glass partition.

"Hello there, what can I do for you?"

"My friend, Toni has been arrested and I would like to be a character witness."

The man's eyebrows raised and he attempted to hide a smile.

"What's your name?" He asked, not unkindly.

"Shona MacLeod, Sir."

This time he did smile fully. "Where are you from, Shona?"

"North Uist."

"Not much crime there."

I nodded, not sure where this was going.

"Toni Martin? That's who your friend is?"

"Yes, Toni - and Eddie Robertson. I don't believe they are guilty, Sir."

"Call me Ron or officer. No need for sir."

I nodded. I had never addressed a policeman before. I had no idea of the correct moniker.

"Shona, Toni and Eddie will be released very soon."

"So they know they're innocent?"

"I'll let them tell you all about it. You get yourself home and don't worry. Okay?"

"Thank you, si...I mean, Ron."

He smiled again. "Good night, Shona."

I left the police station feeling a lot better than when I went in.

When I returned to the flat Susie was there, looking anxious and worried.

"You're home early, is everything okay?"

"Yes, Jimmy sent me home because the customers were gossiping about Toni and Eddie and I got fed up listening and spoke up."

"Good for you. They still aren't out, I'm worried, Shona."

"It's okay, they will be out soon."

"How do you know?"

"Ron told me."

"Who on earth is Ron?"

"A police officer. I went to the station and asked."

Susie frowned. "And he told you this? I went earlier and was told to go home, they wouldn't tell me anything."

"Well, I may have been a little devious."

"Huh? Shona, what did you do?" Susie asked with concern.

I was a little embarrassed by my own antics, but I had needed to know. So I told Susie what I did. "I said I was there to give a character reference."

"You what? You can't do that."

"I know."

"Oh, Shona." Susie said knowingly.

I couldn't hide the little smile that crept across my face.

"Let me guess, Officer Ron was charmed by your naivety and told you a little something."

"That's sort of what happened. He said they would be out soon and could tell us themselves what had happened. He told me not to worry."

Susie smiled at me and gave me a hug. "Shall we make some tea and wait up for them?"

I nodded, that sounded like a plan.

It was less than an hour later when the two of them arrived at the flat. They explained that it was an inside job. All the committee members who had been interviewed had blamed Toni and said Eddie must have given her his keys. It seemed their arrests were simply the police having to follow up on all leads. There was no evidence to charge either of them. Toni said that this had happened before when the last bar manager left the job. They weren't even sacked, so had no motive. But what that did was establish a pattern and pointed the blame elsewhere. Other than the pair of them being tired, they were both fine.

I asked who had been keeping bar at the club that evening and with complete distaste they both answered 'Henry' who it seemed was currently in possession of the keys that had been Toni's. Toni told me that no one would be charged with the robbery, the culprit would have had to have been caught in the act. What a week!

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~ Licit Cusp ~

by weebod

DISCLAIMERS: See [Part 1](#).

FEEDBACK: If you enjoy the story please let me know: weebod@mac.com

Part Five:

Chapter 23

As the weeks went by, things did eventually begin to settle down and return to normal. Eddie continued to work at the club, despite the committee's attempts to implicate him in the robbery, which it turns out involved more than £3,000. It was as if the whole incident never happened. Everyone accepted that someone they knew had robbed the club, but they no longer seemed to care whom it was. Things just went on at the *Railwaymen's Club* as they had before, with the notable exception of Toni, who no longer worked there. She was yesterday's news.

Poor Eddie was miserable working in the club without Toni. I had assumed he would become manager in her absence, but in a strange turn of events, that job was given to Henry, despite his lack of experience and, according to Eddie, his inability to perform the most basic of tasks behind the bar, like pouring a decent pint. Cath worked on as normal, but was as frustrated as Eddie at having to pick up the slack which was basically Henry's work that he was unable to perform adequately, if at all. Meanwhile Henry walked around looking important, with the club keys dangling from a belt loop on his trousers and getting drunk on the free alcohol behind the bar. It all seemed so unfair, but if I had learned anything at all in the past fourteen months, I knew that what was fair and just was seldom the reason behind many decisions made, especially when it came to the *Railwaymen's Club*.

Toni seemed to have taken the whole episode in her stride. The only thing she showed genuine concern over was the recovery of Mr. Bain. She had visited him after he was released from hospital having had a pacemaker fitted to his heart. It seemed there were no hard feelings, but a thank you for saving his life would be a long time coming, if indeed he ever chose to do so. Mrs. Bain however, had been a lot more forthcoming. She thanked Toni in one breath then cursed her in the next for knowing first aid. It seems that she was a long-suffering wife and had all but had enough of her husband's antics and in particular the amount of time he spent in '*that place*'! I'm sure she was joking...

As for work, Toni had fashioned herself into a kind of gun for hire. Anyone in the area who was short staffed behind the bar gave her a call and she did a shift. It seemed more than adequate for Toni, and she had more offers of work than she could handle in a given week. She did her best to fit in as many shifts as she could, saying she was currently happy to be flexible and not tied to a specific job, despite various offers of full-time bar work.

I was studying hard for my end of term exams. Christmas wasn't far away and I found myself with a huge dilemma. I desperately wanted to see my family, but knew I wasn't welcome at home. I had that very week received a letter from Isobel asking me to forward her some money for a school project that my father wouldn't fund. Fifteen pounds seemed an astronomical amount for whatever it was she had plans for, but I trusted her and had sent the money, again to my Gran's, as my father would confiscate any funds I sent her direct.

Isobel had included in her letter a copy of '*Am Paipear*', the local newspaper for the island. I so looked forward to all this information. It served to keep me up to date with what was happening back home although, of course, the juicier gossip was provided by Isobel, but at these times I felt a distinct pang in my stomach and a deep longing in my bones for home. I had never mentioned this to Toni. I had also not mentioned a recent event that I found troubling, but I knew it wouldn't be the last incident of its kind. I recalled the day just a couple of weeks ago when I bumped into Moira, my friend from Oban, who had lived at Mrs. Ramsay's. We had shared so much in common throughout the academic year we spent together in the boarding house under the ever-watchful eye of the owner, but that Saturday afternoon on Portobello high street something had changed. Moira was distant and I'm sure it wasn't my imagination, but she seemed anxious to end our conversation and be on her way. I couldn't help but think that news of my homosexuality had reached her. Why else would she suddenly no longer wish to pass the time of day with me? It was a deeply saddening event. I browsed the latest edition of '*Am Paipear*' with a heavy heart.

'Fools Hunt For Treasure'

Once again treasure hunters have descended upon the island in the latest attempt to locate the 'vast store of riches' believed to be buried somewhere on North Uist. It is said the treasure can only be discovered by "a fool of the family MacC-, at a spot from where he can see at one and the same time three crofts, three duns, and the configuration in the ground of a man ploughing." The treasure hunters can currently be seen scouring the northern slopes of Crogary Mor with metal detectors. Good luck to them, they will need it!

Indeed they would. This was a periodical happenstance, whereby tourists would read or hear the myths about the treasure and decide to come and find it. Needless to say, no one ever had.

'Local Man In Medical Drama'

Donald MacCodrum, of Sollas was evacuated last Tuesday by air ambulance after a serious fall. He was treated in a Glasgow hospital where he underwent surgery to pin his badly broken leg. We wish him a speedy recovery.

I snorted as I read this story. Isobel had already provided me with the true version of what actually happened. Donald was jumping out of the window of another man's house after he returned home early. He did not want to be found in a state of undress with the other man's wife at home!

One story really piqued my interest.

'Pottery Found From Neolithic Period'

Excavation work on the islet of Eilean Domhnuill in Loch Olabhat has yielded evidence for Neolithic activity from around 3650 BC to around 2600 BC. Work continues on the project.

That piece of information really cheered me up. I was always fascinated with the ongoing historical evidence that my little island was continually revealing. Perhaps one day I would uncover something myself.

I sat on the number 46 bus as it took me almost straight to Susie's front door. It was already getting dark that Friday afternoon. I was thankful my exams were finished and that I was now on Christmas holidays from university. The double decker bus was full, standing room only. People were either on their way home from work or Christmas shopping. My head was pounding due to my bunged up nasal passages. Most of the week I had spent with a heavy cold. I seemed to be over the worst of it, but it had left me feeling drained. My scarf was wrapped around my neck, despite the warmer temperature inside the bus. My *Walkman* was on drowning out the sound of the occasional chatter and the constant drone of the rush hour traffic. I was playing the new George Michael *'Faith'* album, but even his sweet voice failed to lift my spirits on this miserable afternoon. The icy rain began to batter off the bus windows and I felt an involuntary shiver run through my body at the thought of going back out in that weather. Maybe I was becoming soft after too much time spent in the city, getting around easily on public transport and in Toni's car. Back on North Uist I would be walking the two miles home from school in this weather, trying to shelter both my sisters and my little brother. We would enter the front door of our croft wet and cold to be met by the warm hearth, a plate of hot winter vegetable soup and home made bread. My mother always looked after us, particularly when we were sick. At that moment I really missed home.

At *The Fern* that evening my headache wasn't any better. The smoky atmosphere was adding to my sinus problems. I had just over an hour of my shift to go and was looking forward to getting home and having a hot drink, followed by a good nights sleep.

"Pint of heavy, Shona, darlin'"

My hand automatically reached for a pint glass, then without much conscious thought, I was holding the glass at an angle below the tap, watching the dark liquid swirl into it. As the beer began to near the top, I would gently reduce the angle till the glass was upright, the end result being a perfect pint with a neat one-inch head of creamy froth on the top. Too much froth, you

got a frown, too little and the patron would often take a sip and ask you to put a decent head on the pint. I prided myself in perfecting this art; even with the faulty tap that poured a little slowly, I had found the knack of getting the right end result. As I put the pint of heavy on to the counter in front of Tam, I noticed a flurry of activity at the front door.

"One pound twenty, Tam, please."

"There you go, Shona."

I took the money and turned towards the till to ring up the transaction.

"You have to let me in! I need to see my sister."

Oh, my goodness, I would have known that voice anywhere. I turned so quickly I almost ran into Marie who was carrying empty glasses. I saw Jimmy already making his way to the front door, he always seemed to pick up on any trouble really quickly, something that Toni was also good at. They both could read the mood of a place and any potential problem areas while going about their job, a particularly good skill for bar managers to have.

The little crowd of mainly male watchers parted as Jimmy moved into it. He then emerged with my seventeen-year old sister and guided her towards the far end of the bar. I walked out to meet them.

"I assume she belongs to you?" He gestured to a decidedly terrified looking Isobel.

I nodded. I was in a bit of shock myself.

"Sit her down at that far table, then get her a lemonade. She looks younger than you and you barely look old enough to be in a bar!" Jimmy shook his head and walked off.

I ushered Isobel to the far table in the corner. It was out the way and near the dartboard, which had a lot to do with it being quiet. I still shuddered when I thought back to the last incident, when Mike Travers started screaming, a dart firmly embedded in his cheek. Jimmy said something about no dart rebounding that far from the board with that kind of force, but the guys playing said it was an unfortunate accident. Mike was fine once he calmed down and got over the shock of it. Apparently he was more traumatised by the event due to a fear of needles, so a dart sticking in his cheek had thrown him into a screaming fit, the poor man.

"What on earth are you doing here, Isobel?"

"I've run away."

"What!"

I saw tears well in her eyes and gave her a heartfelt hug. "It's going to be okay. Whatever it is we can sort it."

She shook her head. Isobel looked so lost here in this pub, I wondered if I had perhaps looked the same when I first stood in front of Toni all those months ago.

"I don't think we can, Shona," she said, a distinct note of despair in her voice, and then began to cry.

I could see that the bar staff were falling behind and knew that I needed to get back behind the bar.

"Sit here, I have to finish work, then I can take you to the flat. Will you be okay for a little longer?"

She nodded. I didn't want to leave her, but I had no choice.

"Oh, and watch out for any stray darts."

Poor Isobel, her eyes went wide, a mild look of panic on her face. She sat facing the dartboard, ready to duck if anything came her way.

I hardly remembered working the rest of the hour my mind was swirling with thoughts of what could have brought Isobel running to Edinburgh.

As soon as we got back to the flat, I made us a cup of tea.

"Now tell me everything?"

"I'm pregnant!" She burst into tears again.

Oh, Dear Lord...

It turns out that Isobel and Rory used condoms, which were supplied by Rory's older brother. He worked on Skye and would bring them to Rory when he came home at weekends. Hugh had gone on holiday with his girlfriend for two weeks and forgotten to bring extra. They ran out of their supply and took a chance, just one time, and now my sister was pregnant.

"My life is ruined, Shona. If I return home, father will make me marry Rory and I don't want to!"

"Maybe we can talk him into allowing you to return home and make him see that you marrying Rory isn't what you want."

"No, he won't go for that. He will see me as a disgrace to him, bringing shame on the family." She was sobbing now. "What am I going to do, Shona?" she asked despairingly.

What indeed? I would speak to Toni; I had to take Isobel home to at least give it a try.

Chapter 24

The buzzer went at precisely 7.30am. I knew it was Toni and pushed the stair intercom button to allow her entry. Before I replaced the handset I could already hear her bounding up the well-worn stone stairway, her long legs eating the steps up three at a time. I opened the front door and Toni was there, looking very excited. A warm red ski jacket, driving gloves, a polo neck, jeans and Nike trainers made up her outfit. I took this all in as she stood impatiently before me, practically bouncing on her toes. I wondered why she was so eager to be driving to North Uist, then the answer hit me straight between the eyes, Toni loved to drive, she especially loved to drive fast and we were going to be using the motorways today.

"Morning." She grinned and gave me a quick peck on the cheek, before brushing past me to go in search of our luggage.

I rolled my eyes and mumbled, "Morning," as I followed her into the living room.

Within minutes Toni had our luggage squashed into her car boot, and Isobel and me sitting in the back seat. Toni reached to the passenger seat and picked up a road atlas with a notebook, she handed both to Isobel.

"You are the co-driver."

This news seemed to perk my sister up a little; she had been looking pensive ever since we got up that morning. I gave Toni a look that was part curious and I have to admit, I was also a little confused. Why couldn't I be in charge of the maps? I looked at her expecting an explanation. She gave me one of her winning smiles.

"Shona, you are our tour guide for the day, please tell us any interesting facts about the places we pass."

I'm sure that was supposed to placate me, but it didn't. I continued to stare.

"You can't be co-driver with your terrible sense of direction," Toni said.

Isobel, the rat, agreed with her!

"She was always getting us lost as kids, it was lucky we lived on an island."

The two of them shared a laugh at my expense.

"We will be stopping for lunch at Spean Bridge," Toni declared. Then, "Buckle up everyone."

"Spear Bridge, constructed by Thomas Telford in the early 1800's - interesting fact - The village of Spear Bridge is not, as you would expect, named after the bridge built by Telford, but in fact an earlier bridge built by General Wade, which crosses the river Spear. Or at least it did until part of it collapsed into the river in 1913." I couldn't help myself, if I was going to be tour guide, I might as well get started. And I admit there was a degree of pettiness in the timing of my comments.

Toni made a face and I could see Isobel attempting to hide a smirk.

"She's pretty good with the history stuff your sister."

"She sure is," Isobel replied with a hint of pride.

Toni laughed and started the engine our journey was about to begin.

"*Siubhlach*." My sister remarked to me as we sped along the motorway towards Perth.

I nodded and replied, "*Neach-cuthaich*."

Isobel giggled and nodded.

I glanced at Toni in her rear view mirror; I could see her eyes had narrowed, a questioning look in them.

"I get the feeling you two are talking about me."

Isobel and I shared a knowing look.

"I am banning all foreign languages from the car."

We were both horrified. Toni had referred to the Scots language as foreign. Okay, only 60,000 Scots still spoke it, but still!

"*Nar, maslach*."

"Right that's it!"

Toni was beginning to lose patience with us. "If you don't translate I'm going to make you both walk."

"Shona said you are shameful for referring to Gaelic as a foreign language."

"Neach- brathaidh."

"Now she has just called me a traitor."

"You said Toni was speeding!" I protested.

"And you called her a maniac," Isobel replied."

"Okay, that's true." I attempted to get myself out of this one, "But you have to agree your driving is a little..." I rotated my hand to try to convey what I meant.

"What? My driving is a little what?" Toni demanded to know.

I looked to Isobel for support but I was clearly on my own with this one.

"You are a very skilled driver, Toni. The problem is that you drive everywhere at one hundred miles an hour!"

After that we were silent until we reached Perth, I think Toni and I had just had our first disagreement.

"Can we stop in Perth for a bathroom break, Toni?"

"Of course, Isobel."

"Thank you. If you take the first left after the ring road there should be a public toilet."

"Actually, since we are making such good time, I think we can stop for some refreshments, how about a cup of tea?"

No wonder we were making such good time, I think Toni had filled up with aviation fuel! We all agreed on stopping and found a nice café in the centre of Perth.

"Great work co-driver."

Isobel smiled, completely charmed by Toni. I simply glared at my girlfriend.

"Well, Shona, tell us something about Perth?"

I wasn't in the mood, but it was Isobel who asked, so I obliged.

"Perth's origins come from a fort built by the Romans around AD83. The fort acted as a supply base for their occasional occupation of north eastern Scotland. This location was chosen because it was the highest point on the river Tay that the Roman ships could reach. Perth's history has been intimately tied with its river ever since."

"What? No interesting *fact* this time?" This was from Toni and the sarcasm was hard to miss.

"Thank you, Shona, that was very enlightening."

Toni and I continued to glare at each other and Isobel excused herself and went to the bathroom. This left Toni and me alone at the table.

I decided to be adult about our differences and I handed Toni an olive branch. "I'm sorry I called you a maniac."

"It's okay, I know I like to drive fast." She sounded a little despondent.

"Yes you do, but you have been nothing but generous to me and now you are extending that generosity to my sister. I'm sorry for criticising your driving."

Toni smiled at me, "And I'm sorry for being petty, I really do enjoy your knowledge of history."

She took my hand and gave it a squeeze. "Are we better?"

"Yes."

The remainder of our journey to Skye was taken only a little over the speed limit instead of a lot. For which I was truly grateful.

The minute we all got on the ferry for the final leg of our journey you could feel the mood palpably change. After Perth, our journey had become a lot of fun thanks to Toni. She had a way of doing that. Toni was a really upbeat person to be around. Isobel had been laughing at her jokes and antics, her troubles temporarily forgotten, but now as the ferry traversed the last part of our journey across the water to North Uist, reality was setting in as quickly as the dark winter night. A silence had descended over the three of us. Part fatigue and for my sister and me a good dose of anxiety too, as we contemplated what lay ahead.

Chapter 26

When the ferry arrived at port in Lochmaddy, it was already dark. Toni had booked us into a bed and breakfast nearby. The plan was to drop off our luggage then go to my parents home with Isobel to try and smooth things over. I knew my mother would be worried sick about her sudden departure, so the sooner we went to the croft the sooner we could put her mind at ease and help Isobel explain her reason for leaving. After Toni and myself dropped off our luggage in the twin

room she had booked, we set off in the car on the sixteen mile journey to the west side of the island. It was so dark there was nothing to see beyond the car headlights. The only other lights dotting the landscape came from the various houses scattered over the island.

Isobel was becoming increasingly nervous as the minutes and the miles ticked by. I took her hand in an attempt to reassure her, trying to keep my own butterflies at bay. Isobel's predicament had all but removed my own fear of returning to the island, but as we neared the croft, I was becoming more and more nervous. I doubted that my father would have had any change of heart, but I was here to support my sister, not attempt to repair my shattered relationship with him.

Toni pulled up behind my father's tractor and switched the headlights off, before getting out and removing Isobel's bag from the boot.

"I'm so scared, Shona," she confessed in a small voice, so unlike her.

"It will be alright, Izzie, I won't let anything happen to you."

Toni handed Isobel her bag. "I'll be right here if you need me, okay?"

We both nodded. The wind was very strong over this side of the island, whipping in right off the Atlantic, carrying the salt with it. Toni's long hair was being blown all over the place.

"You should sit in the car, its cold."

She nodded, "Go on, I'll be waiting for you."

Isobel and I walked to the door, which we knew would be unlocked. There was never any need to use a lock and key in this remote place. We shared a look and with a slight nod from Isobel, I opened the heavy wooden door.

My mother and little sister immediately ran to greet us. They were both crying.

"Oh, thank God you are back, Isobel. I have been so worried."

My mother hugged Isobel tightly to her, the relief she felt was palpable.

I hugged my little sister, so overwhelmed I was to see her again.

"And you, Shona, oh how I have missed you." My mother turned to me and kissed my cheek. Somehow the four of us ended up entwined together.

I glanced into the sitting room and saw my young brother, Dougall standing inside the door with his hands in his pockets. His eyes were darting between the four of us and my father, while he scraped the toe of his boot nervously against the slate floor.

"Dougall," I called gently, welcoming him into the family reunion.

His eyes widened and a smile broke out on his little face as he took a step forward...

"Stay where you are lad." Came the stern warning from my father, before Dougall could take another step.

I watched my brother retreat until his back touched the stone wall, his eyes full of longing and sorrow. The reality hit me so suddenly that I almost felt it as a blow. While myself, Isobel and Moira had been and would in the future have problems with my father it was poor Dougall who was really going to have the hardest time of all. While the expectation was that we three would be obedient, do as we were told and then go on to become good wives to our future husbands, the expectation on Dougall's little shoulders was so much greater. He was to follow in my father's footsteps. We had a chance, a way out, poor Dougall was going to be moulded in my father's image whether he liked it or not. He was to become a crofter, working the land as the seasons dictated all year round. Would it be what he wanted?

We broke apart and my mother guided us into the sitting room where the fire was roaring in the hearth, heating the main room of the croft. My father sat in his armchair, he had yet to move or utter a word to us since we arrived.

I nodded in greeting to him. He refused to answer instead he stared unnervingly at me for a few seconds before shifting his attention to Isobel.

"So you have returned."

She nodded. My father seemed to have a way of rendering us almost mute with a look or the tone of his voice. He sounded deceptively calm.

"It's obvious where you went. The question to be answered is why you left?"

He waited patiently for Isobel's reply.

"I was scared father." Isobel could not look at him, her head was bowed, she was terrified.

"Why?"

"I'm pregnant," she whispered.

"You whore!" His words thundered through the croft, causing us all to jump. He stood and walked towards her.

"Who is the father?" His voice was low and demanding.

Isobel shook her head. "I...it doesn't matter."

"Tell me who the father is, then we can set about *sorting* this sorry mess."

I looked at my mother; her hand was covering her mouth, her eyes wide. My father's jaw was set hard as his eyes practically bored holes into my sister's head. Isobel would still not look at him.

"Is it Rory MacAulay?"

"Yes." The word came out with a sob.

"Then first thing tomorrow I will go see his father to get things organised."

"No." Isobel was pleading with him, begging him with that one word.

"It's the right thing to do. Mr. MacAulay and I will sort out the details and let that be an end to it."

"I don't want to marry Rory." The tears were streaming down her face.

"It's too late for that now!" he roared.

Isobel was losing this battle of wills with my father. If he got his way she would be married before Christmas. I couldn't stand by and let that happen, knowing it wasn't what she wanted.

"Father, Isobel wants to return home, but she doesn't want to marry Rory."

He turned to me with a look of utter disgust on his face.

"You *dare* speak to me and call me father?" His voice was harsh. "You are an abomination! Committing ungodly acts with that monster out there!"

He came towards me with his hand clenched into a fist. I stumbled backwards trying to get out of his way as my sisters and mother screamed. The door to the croft burst open and Toni ran and stood before my father preventing his advance towards me.

"Don't you dare strike her or you will be sorry."

I could see her fists clenched by her sides as she waited my father out.

"Get out of my house!"

Toni stood a good three inches taller than my father and for the first time I saw fear in his eyes. He had stopped in his tracks and I doubted that if he took her on he would win. He seemed to be considering the same thing.

"I am not leaving until you hear Isobel out." Toni's voice was calm, but her intention was clear.

She looked to Isobel encouraging her to continue.

"I want to return home and to finish my schooling, but I don't want to be married."

"If you wish to remain under my roof, you will leave school and marry Rory. You will become a wife and mother. I will not have you and your *bastard* living on this island!"

Isobel, Moira and my mother were crying now. It was clear there would be no reasoning with my father. I don't know why we held onto the hope that there ever could be. I think I had talked Isobel into returning more for my mother's sake.

"Come back to Edinburgh with me, Isobel. I'll look after you."

"But you have your studies, Shona," she protested.

"We can make it work." This was from Toni. "If you come back with us, you can finish school and have the baby. If that's what you want?"

"No!" My father lunged at Toni this time, but she was ready. Side-stepping him she turned to face him, ready for his next move. He came at her again and they ended up against the wall, with Toni pressing my father there, an arm over his chest. He was breathing heavily.

"Don't do this! Not in front of your family."

"Let me go!"

"If I do, you will take a seat and calm down?"

He nodded and Toni stood back and allowed him to move. He eyed her cautiously before taking a seat in his armchair.

"Mr. MacLeod, Isobel does not want to get married."

"She can't remain here as an unmarried mother."

Toni turned to Isobel, "What do you want to do?"

Isobel looked to my mother. "I'm so sorry, I want to stay with you, but I cannot."

"I'll look after her mother, I promise."

My mum nodded. We all knew that if Isobel stayed my father would force the marriage.

"It's for the best, Margaret. Your *whore* and your *abomination* can leave with the evil that has brought them here this evening."

With that, I was dismissed from his life for a second time, but I now had company in Isobel. We

were about to leave, but Toni wasn't finished with my father.

"I will bring Shona and Isobel back tomorrow afternoon to say goodbye. If you don't want to see them, then I suggest you find somewhere else to be." She then turned to my mother and asked softly, "Will two o'clock be a suitable time Mrs. MacLeod?"

My mother nodded, she was visibly shocked and upset with what had happened tonight.

"We'll see you tomorrow then."

Toni waited patiently as Isobel and myself said a quick goodnight, then the three of us walked in silence to the Nova.

Back at the guesthouse Toni booked a single room for herself and left the twin to Shona and me. I needed to be close to my sister this night, I knew what it felt like to walk away from the croft knowing you were not welcome back to see your family. I assured Isobel that we would be back after the baby was born; we would see them again no matter what. My father could keep us away from the house, but not the island. The last thing Toni had said to me before going to her room, was that she would bring us back anytime we wanted. I knew without a doubt that she would.

The following morning we were all up early. The mood was sombre after the events of the previous evening. Toni seemed to be hovering by the window the entire time. I wondered what had caught her attention so fully. Perhaps she just loved the view, it was a lovely, clear winter's day and I thought that it might be a good opportunity to spend a little time showing Toni the island. We had nothing else to do till 2pm; it would be a relaxing way to pass the time.

There was a loud roar as a motorcycle pulled up right outside the guesthouse. I saw Toni's eyebrows rise in disbelief and I knew exactly who it was. I turned to Isobel.

"*Motair-rothair*, May."

"Aye."

Toni turned to give us both a questioning look.

"It's our Gran, she has the nickname 'Motorcycle May'."

"Your grandmother rides around on that classic motorcycle?" Toni asked in disbelief as she pointed out the window.

We both nodded. She had been riding around the island for years on her motorcycle. My grandfather had obviously not yet been able to stop her despite his constant requests that she get something a little more suitable.

"She has had it ever since I can remember. I think she developed a love for them during the Second World War."

Toni looked again. "Well judging by the look of it, I would say that is probably true."

She was referring to its camouflage paint.

Toni smiled wickedly. "Have you two had a lift from her?"

We both nodded in unison, the memories of whizzing round the island in the sidecar while my Gran delivered various items to the elderly residents who found themselves no longer able to make the journey for supplies, were mostly thrilling, some a little more so than others. Toni wasn't the first fast driver we had encountered.

"That is incredible," Toni declared. She was clearly impressed with my Gran and had yet to meet her, but that was about to change. There was a hard rap on the wooden door. I immediately answered it. Before we could even greet her, my Gran was speaking.

"The entire island knows the pair of you are holed up here with a tall dark stranger - now what's going on? And I want the truth! All of it." She pointed at Isobel and myself with her motorcycle helmet that was still in her hand, her well-worn leather jacket looking so out of place over her dress tweed trousers.

My gran took the only chair in the room and listened intently to the entire story we had to tell, everything from Isobel's pregnancy to my relationship with Toni. She sat back in her chair and regarded the two of us thoughtfully, her lips pursed.

"My, my. You two have certainly been busy."

Then she set about finding out all the details she could.

"So young Rory MacAulay is the father?"

"Yes, Gran."

"Does he know about the baby?"

"Yes - he offered to do the right thing, truly he did, but it isn't what I want."

"Then that is the most important thing." She spoke with such strength that I could see Isobel visibly pull herself together right in front of my eyes.

"When do you leave the island?"

"Tomorrow morning."

She mulled over this information for a few moments. "What do you plan to do until then?"

"Toni is taking us to visit mother today at two o'clock."

"And your father is aware of this?"

We both nodded. "Yes, Gran."

She turned her attention to Toni for the first time; she was still standing by the window. "I'm May Ferguson." She introduced herself properly and shook Toni's hand.

"Toni Martin, it's a pleasure to meet you Mrs. Ferguson."

She waived off Toni's formality, "Call me May."

Toni nodded.

"So you are going to take these two back to Edinburgh with you and look after them?"

"Whatever they need, May. I'll make sure they have it."

"It's not going to be easy, what with one pregnant and the other at university. I'm concerned that Shona's studies will suffer as she struggles to find the time to keep up. I know her, she will devote her attention to making sure Isobel is emotionally and financially secure, putting herself last. She is like her mother in that respect."

"Don't you worry, May, I'll make sure Shona has all the study time she needs and they won't be on their own in Edinburgh. Shona has made good friends, we will all be around to help."

My Gran smiled at Toni then turned her attention fully on me.

"Shona, lass. I always wondered if you would ever find love. You never seemed particularly interested in the boys. The only time I saw any passion in you was when you were speaking about the past, your love of history. That's when I saw your eyes light up and you would glow. Now I see that same look for the first time directed at another human being. It warms my heart, as I feared it wouldn't happen. I thought you would end up with some stuffy older professor, but here you are and might I say what a fine specimen she is! Smart too, I like that." She looked Toni over as if she were a prize bull at auction and nodded her approval.

I blushed furiously at my Gran's blatant examination of my girlfriend, but it didn't seem to bother Toni in the slightest, quite the opposite in fact.

"Thank you, Gran. Your approval means a lot to me."

"Don't get carried away, lass, because you won't find a lot of it around here."

I nodded, knowing it was true.

"Can I have a word in private with you, Toni?"

Toni nodded and Isobel and I left them alone, popping into Toni's single room until they were finished.

When we returned to our room, there had been a change of plans. Instead of waiting till two o'clock we were going to the croft now. Our Gran was going to follow us on her motorcycle. Isobel and I were happy to go with the change, I could show Toni the island after we visited. It would still be light enough.

We arrived at the croft less than thirty minutes later. 'Motorcycle May' did not follow instead she overtook us not five minutes into the journey. My gran knew these roads like the back of her hand, but I could see Toni itching to return the favour. Fortunately she erred on the side of caution and we all arrived safely.

My mother, brother and youngest sister were inside. My father was, as expected, out working the land. The mood was markedly different from the evening before. I was able to hug my little brother, like we had both wanted to. He was getting taller. I ruffled his short brown hair and gave him the Christmas present I had purchased on Skye, while waiting for the ferry.

I watched as Dougall ripped open the Christmas wrapping paper and stared wide-eyed at the gift. Then the biggest grin ate up his face as he picked up the red kite and mimicked its motion in the air.

He gave me a quick hug of thanks, and then ran outside without even thinking to put his winter coat on, so desperate he was to fly his new kite. We all watched him for a few minutes as he wrestled with the aerodynamics of his new toy. He was having a lot of fun. My Gran headed off a few minutes later, as she had some chores to do and Toni walked her out to her motorcycle.

"That was very kind of you, Shona." My mother said to me with a fond gaze.

"I have gifts for you and Moira too."

I reached into the bag to remove the two packages. I watched intently as both my mother and youngest sister opened their gifts.

For Moira I had chosen a silver necklace with a little dolphin pendant. She loved jewellery and she was always on the shore hoping to catch a glimpse of a dolphin, she hadn't yet, but I admired her tenacity. I hoped the pendant would bring her luck. And for my mother I had purchased a set of watercolours and a sketchpad. She said she wanted to paint and I thought that maybe this

would help get her started. Judging by the tears and hugs that followed I knew the gifts were very much appreciated.

"Promise me you will paint?"

"I will now that I have the tools to do so." I believed her.

Toni returned a few minutes later and I introduced her to my mother, they had yet to meet properly, and to my pleasant surprise they seemed to get along fine. My mother told us that, when Isobel had disappeared my father had gone through her belongings with a fine toothcomb, looking for any clues as to where she had gone and why. In the process he had found my letters and, from reading them, learned of my relationship with Toni.

After a couple of hours catching up it was time to leave. My father always came home for lunch at noon. We thought it best to be gone before he returned. We said our final farewells and Toni once again promised my mother that she would bring Isobel and myself back to the island to visit after the baby was born. Moira hugged us tightly, declaring that as soon as she was old enough she was coming visit us. She looked meaningfully at Toni who agreed. It seemed that no MacLeod girl could go anywhere at the moment without the assistance of Toni, but she seemed to be taking it all in her stride. I wondered if Moira would leave North Uist when she was old enough or if she would stay. I had yet to hear her say anything in regards to this.

We waved to Dougall as he ran towards us, a big grin on his face and the kite blowing high in the wind behind him. Toni took hold of the kite as he gave us each a hug. We watched as she showed him how to keep the kite in the air without having to run all the time, I'm sure his exhausted little legs would be very appreciative.

Finally we left the croft, Isobel and myself hugging in the back seat of the Nova as Toni manoeuvred the car towards the road.

"Is there anywhere you would like to see while it's still light?" she asked as we reached the main road.

Isobel shrugged, she had no preference, having only been living on the island a matter of days ago, but I was desperate to see the shore, so I asked Toni to turn right instead of left back to Lochmaddy.

It was less than a mile to one of my favourite places, Hosta beach. Toni parked on the long grass at the edge of the beach. Isobel decided to stay in the car. Toni and I walked hand in hand to the shore. I sighed deeply at the view before me. I felt an inner peace settle over me, one that I had missed greatly. I truly believed there was no other place on earth like this. Toni stood silently behind me, her arms hugging me to her.

"Oh my God...it's incredible." The awe in her voice was unmistakable.

I nodded my agreement. "It's special."

"I have never seen sand so white and pure and the sea looking so vibrant and colourful." She spoke in a low voice, fearing she would disturb the moment.

"What do you feel?"

Toni took a few moments to consider her answer. "I feel an inner calm. A tranquillity of sorts."

I smiled and leaned back into her, she kissed the top of my head and gave me an extra squeeze, we stood like that for sometime, just absorbing our surroundings; it was perfect. I had always believed that I would experience moments like this. Moments where my world would fall into place for a small period of time, the physical, spiritual and psychological all synchronising to create a perfect snapshot. This was one such time for me and I hoped it was for Toni too. I turned to share a long lingering kiss with her on this isolated beach on the edge of the Atlantic, to seal the experience. I had a perfect memory, one that would live with me for the rest of my life. We turned and walked back to the Nova hand in hand.

Back in Lochmaddy we went to the bakery to buy lunch, then took it back to the guesthouse. Sitting in the lounge eating and chatting about what we would do with the rest of our day, we all heard the motorcycle pull up and knew that my Gran was back, but we weren't prepared for what happened next.

"Thoir a-mach ris an tom!"

Isobel and myself immediately started to panic, my Gran had just told us to run to the hills. We were frantic. Toni immediately took off upstairs, leaving my Gran to catch her breath and explain a little more to us.

"Your father is on his way."

Toni was back within a minute, our bags in her hands, calling for us to follow her to the car and hustling us into the back seat. Before we had time to consider what was happening we were in the car and following my Gran as she tore along on her motorcycle. We were doing well over the speed limit and there were definitely times when the three wheels of the motorcycle and sidecar and the four wheels of the Nova were not on the tarmac.

"Where are we going, Toni?" Isobel asked, the panic evident in her voice.

"I know roughly where we are headed, but basically I can't lose sight of your Gran," she answered tersely.

Toni went back to concentrating on the road, and Isobel and myself held hands and prayed in the

back seat.

We ended up in a barn on Benbecula, both the motorcycle and the Nova stored inside hidden from view. Toni got out and closed the barn door as Isobel and I sat silently in the darkening building fearing that our father would find us.

Minutes later we were in the sitting room of an old friend of my grandmothers, Mrs. Lamont.

"I knew your father would pull a stunt like this. He just couldn't let it go. I told Toni this morning that I didn't trust your father, that's why we changed your visit time. I followed him today, he spoke firstly with Rory's father, Angus, and then they went together to visit the Reverend Halliday. When I saw them get Rory and head to the croft I knew for sure that he was planning to marry you and Rory in the croft this afternoon. That's when I immediately headed to Lochmaddy."

"What will we do now? Am I going to be trapped here?"

"Don't you worry about a thing, Isobel. You will be on the boat tomorrow come hell or high water, of that I promise you."

My Gran always was a smart woman and crafty too. With the vehicles out of sight we were able to spend the night at Mrs. Lamont's. The next morning, Mrs. Lamont left early with Isobel safely hidden in the back of her Land Rover, while Toni and myself made the journey to Lochmaddy. My Gran had gone home the evening before.

When we got to the port my father was there along with his cohorts, expecting us to turn up with Isobel in the car to board the ferry. When she was nowhere to be seen he insisted on looking in the boot. Toni readily obliged. All the while I tried not to look at the Land Rover waiting to board the ferry several vehicles in front of us.

As the ship left the port with the three of us safely on board, Isobel stayed out of sight while Toni and I brazenly waved to my Gran who had made the trip to wave us off.

"Remind me to never cross your grandmother. That woman could teach the army a thing or two."

I laughed. "She is certainly something."

"Oh, she is that, and when we return in the summer she is going to let me ride her motorbike!" Toni's eyes lit up in anticipation.

Good Lord, I could only imagine the trouble the pair of them would get up too! '*Motair-rothair*, May' and 'Toni the Tornado' eating up the single lane roads of North Uist, it just didn't bear thinking about.

Chapter 27

We made good time getting back to Edinburgh. The mood on the trip home had been subdued. Isobel was especially quiet; I think the shock of having such a close call had been quite unnerving. One thing we all knew for sure, had she not come to Edinburgh, she would have been a married woman by now.

Toni dropped us off at Susie's flat. Susie had no idea I was returning with my sister in tow. She had been terrific when Isobel turned up on Friday, immediately offering to let her stay at the flat before I even had to ask. Now we were returning and Isobel was back in Edinburgh to stay, I would have to sort out a more permanent arrangement.

When we walked into the flat, Susie immediately greeted us, anxious to find out how we got on. Upon seeing, Isobel she had her answer.

"Oh, it didn't go as planned then?"

"That would be an understatement." I replied. "I'll tell you everything, but right now we are all tired and could really do with a good night's rest. Will it be okay if Isobel stays here tonight?"

"Absolutely. Stay as long as you need to, Isobel."

Susie was being very gracious, but it just wouldn't work having Isobel here permanently. There wasn't enough room.

"Thanks, Susie, I promise it will only be for a day or two, till we get something else organised."

"Honestly, Shona, there is no rush."

I knew Susie meant that, but it would be unfair to expect her to take on another lodger for any length of time.

I walked Toni to the front door. I wished she didn't have to head home, but there was no other option.

"I feel like we haven't been able to have any quality time together in so long. I'm sorry life has been so hectic." I hoped she understood. We hadn't been intimate for over three weeks now, what with my exams and Isobel turning up.

Toni smiled, but I could tell she wasn't happy with the situation.

"Not to worry, I understand, and right now your sister needs you."

"Thanks for being so understanding and patient too."

We hugged.

"I miss you." I really did, I longed to be with her.

"I miss you too."

We shared a deep lingering kiss, that left us both longing for so much more, but it wasn't to be this night. It really had been too long. Christmas was in two days and I planned to make it up to Toni. *The Fern* would be closed that Friday and I was going to cook a special dinner for Toni and her father. Now Isobel would be there too, she could help. The one change would be that I would not be able to spend Christmas night alone with Toni and I couldn't in good conscience leave Isobel staying in my room with Eddie and Susie next door. I would ask Toni if she could stay the night at her flat.

I went back into the living room and made up a bed on one of the sofas. I gave Isobel my single bed; I think she needed it the most right now.

I tucked her in and kissed her forehead, wishing her sweet dreams.

"Don't worry, Izzie, it's going to be okay, I promise you."

She nodded sadly, I think it was going to take a little more time for everything to sink in, but I would make sure Isobel was safe and well. I had made a promise to my mother and I intended to keep it. We were going to be fine. I recalled Isobel joking when I left North Uist early that summer that we might end up in the same city next year. Little did we know then that we would be together a lot sooner. Little did either of us know then, what lay ahead.

As I put my head down that night I thought back to the events of the past two days. I let my mind wander as I thought of all that had happened, ending with my Gran practically smuggling Isobel off the island to safety. I couldn't help but think back to Flora MacDonald helping Bonnie Prince Charlie flee to safety on Skye, just as we had. Perhaps it wasn't so far fetched to think that we really were direct descendants of Flora. If my Gran was anything to go by - it certainly seemed to be in the blood. It was a comforting thought and my last before sleep claimed me that night.

Isobel and I arrived early at Toni's flat on Christmas morning. We wanted to get the turkey in the oven. Toni had dropped us off and then said something about needing to drop off presents. I'm sure she just wanted to be out of the way while the cooking was being done. I had yet to see her

actually cook a meal; I was beginning to suspect she was absolutely useless in a kitchen.

In less than two hours we had everything ready, either cooking or prepared. Toni would be arriving with her father at 2pm. I had yet to be properly introduced to Mr. Martin, and I didn't exactly have happy memories of our first encounter. Admittedly at the time, I had no idea my bottom was being squeezed by my future girlfriend's father. I had yet to impart that little gem of information to my sister. Isobel had perked up a little in the last two days. We had chatted a lot about everything that had happened. Toni had told us not to worry about accommodation, as she had everything under control. When I pressed her for more information she simply said all would be revealed in due course. Whatever that meant! Still I trusted Toni; she had a knack of always being one step ahead of the game. It turns out that back on North Uist she was having the exact same thoughts as my Gran, with regards to my father. I thought she was constantly looking out of the window at the scenery, when in actual fact she was keeping an eye out for any sign of trouble. No wonder she and my Gran had hit it off so well.

Toni and Mr. Martin arrived just after two. I forgot what a mountain of a man he was. Mr. Martin must have stood a good four inches taller than Toni and he was built like a lumberjack. Isobel and me just kept looking up and up...

"Shona, Isobel. Meet my dad, Keith. Keith, this is Shona and her sister Isobel."

Mr. Martin offered his hand to shake first mine, then Isobel's. His large hand engulfed ours, but his handshake was warm and surprising gentle.

"It's a real pleasure to meet you both. Toni has told me a lot about you. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Martin," we chorused.

"Such polite girls, but please, call me Keith."

We both nodded and an awkward silenced followed. Toni broke the silence and removed the white elephant in the room all in one sentence.

"Don't worry, Shona. Keith is sober and he knows exactly where to keep his hands."

Mr. Martin looked very sheepish.

"Ah, yes, about that incident. I am truly sorry for my behaviour, Shona. I was drunk, which is no excuse," he hastened to add. "But you can be sure it will never happen again."

"Damn right," was the comment from Toni. While Isobel looked at me for an explanation.

"Apology accepted, Keith."

"Thanks, Lass. Now I have some gifts." He looked to Toni, who produced a couple of neatly wrapped packages.

We politely accepted our presents and I gave Keith a gift from Isobel and myself. I had asked Toni what to get her father, but didn't go with her suggestion of a kick up the backside. I instead purchased some aftershave, which I hoped he would like. We each got a new album, Isobel's was 'U2 *The Joshua tree*. She seemed very happy with it. I got REM *Document*. I thanked Keith. When I asked Toni about the choice later, she said this album would save me from a life of bad taste in dodgy pop music. The cheek!

After dinner Keith excused himself, as he had another engagement. Toni rolled her eyes and told him it was okay that he wanted to see his girlfriend on Christmas day. By the look on his face, Keith clearly had no idea that Toni knew about his new romance.

"Ah, I'm sorry, Toni. I would have said something sooner, but..."

He trailed off, not sure what else to say to his daughter, but Toni didn't seem to mind the idea of her father with another woman.

"Don't sweat it big guy. Life goes on."

"Thanks, Toni. It was lovely to meet you both," he said to Isobel and me.

Keith had been charming and quite funny all afternoon. He wasn't what I expected at all. After my first impressions of him at the club, I would admit that I was a little concerned about spending time in his company. It seemed that alcohol really did change his personality and not for the better. He was harmless while under the influence, but a lot less inhibited when it came to inappropriate behaviour with the ladies.

"I'll drop you off, it's Portobello right?"

"Keith nodded, "Yes, Mary lives down by the bowling green."

"You could do a lot worse, she is a nice woman."

"Aye, we'll see."

Toni smiled at her father's reluctance to admit to anything further.

"Isobel, do you mind if I borrow Shona for a little while? We won't be gone long, an hour at the most."

I wondered why Toni wanted me to accompany her, but Isobel had no problem with being alone in the flat. She too had discovered the joys of television!

We dropped Keith off at his girlfriend's then Toni headed along Portobello High Street, stopping

just past the main junction. She parked the Nova and I looked at her curiously.

"I have something to show you."

We were sitting in her car in the dark, Portobello almost devoid of people and traffic, a most unusual occurrence. I couldn't imagine what Toni could want to show me that I hadn't already seen many times before on this stretch of road.

It was cold outside, but not too bad for December, more importantly, it was dry. Despite all the Christmas cards saying something to the contrary, a white Christmas really was a rare occurrence. I walked with Toni to the junction, where we crossed the road. Toni stopped on the other side.

"This is a bar."

I knew that and I wondered why Toni was pointing it out. The place had been closed ever since I moved here; I had no idea when it was last open.

"Okay."

"It's not just any bar. It is my bar."

"What?"

I had no idea. This was definitely news to me, and more importantly why hadn't Toni told me?

"I signed the deal for it last week."

"You just *bought* a bar?"

Toni nodded and smiled. "Yes, I just bought a bar. They don't come cheap, but I got a loan from Richard Armstrong. It was something we had spoken of in passing when he would visit the *Railwaymen's Club*, the idea of me getting my own bar, and he said at the time he could help me with raising the capital. His brewery has loaned me the money to buy this place. Part of that deal involves stocking the bar with their products. I have no problem with that; they make great beers and lager. What do you think?"

I stood blinking for a moment, I was a little stunned, but it made so much sense really. Toni owning her own bar was a lot better than Toni working in someone else's bar.

"I think it's great!"

"I thought you would. There is more though. This bar comes with a flat above it. A two bedroomed flat."

I let that information sink in, was Toni saying what I thought she was? I bit my lip and just

waited her out, hoping.

"I want you and Isobel to come live with me."

She was, I threw myself at her, something Isobel thought I should have done long before now, but this was different. Toni caught me in her arms and swung me around.

"I'm going to sell my flat in Musselburgh to free up the capital. I'll be using that money to refurbish the bar and the new flat needs a bit of work too. It's going to be a busy few months getting this place ready, but it will all be worth it. I'm going to employ Eddie and Cath, well if they want the work, and maybe you would like me as a boss too?"

I was so happy I wanted to cry. In one move Toni was solving the problems of a whole lot of people, including herself. I knew this would be a success; she was made for this kind of challenge.

"I love you so much."

"And I love you too."

I glanced up at the bar from over Toni's shoulder; there was something about it that had always struck me as odd.

"Ah, Toni?"

"Yessss."

"Will you be changing the name of the bar?"

She looked at me and started laughing.

"What?" I demanded, she just laughed harder.

She answered me when she regained her composure.

"The G and the L were removed a long time ago, someone's idea of a joke. It should read 'The Glassblower'. I don't think Portobello is quite ready for a gay bar."

We returned to the flat and I couldn't wait to tell Isobel the good news. She was ecstatic at the idea of the three of us living together. In the few days she had known Toni, Isobel had quickly taken to my girlfriend. They got on very well. They seemed to share a similar sense of humour, I was still undecided as to whether that was a good or bad thing, but I did enjoy the teasing being thrown my way, it was more affectionate than anything else.

I helped Toni make up the sofa bed for Isobel and then we retired to Toni's bedroom. I can

honestly say that all I wanted to do was rip her clothes off and ravage her all night long, but the thought of my sister just a few yards away made me hesitant. This was our first night together in so long; I really did want to make the most of it.

Slowly we undressed, both acutely aware of the building sexual tension. Keeping my hands off Toni became a moot point because the minute she was naked, I lost all sense of reason and inhibition.

We fell onto the bed kissing passionately, I was on top of Toni, a position I was becoming most comfortable with. She moved me up so she could use her mouth on my breasts. I wanted desperately to return the favour, but she had other ideas.

Toni encouraged me to sit astride her face, I was tentative to begin with, but she was very persuasive. I could feel her tongue forage amongst my folds, mapping them by touch and taste alone for I could see her eyes were shut, a look of serene pleasure upon her countenance. I felt her hot wet tongue enter me, and my eyes closed at the welcome intrusion into my most intimate places. My palms were pressed flat against the wall, which offered me some stability, whilst my thighs trembled from the abundance of oral pleasure I was receiving.

The strain of keeping myself upright combined with the gratification I was feeling, induced a resulting conflict that was a heady mix of sexual pleasure accompanied by just a hint of frustration. I wanted to orgasm but at the same time I was concentrating on staying upright, not wanting to collapse onto the face of my lover. My lover - Toni...

I rested my overheated body against the cold wall, my forehead seeking out its cooling relief as Toni continued to offer me the sweetest torture. As she concentrated fully on my pleasure, I could almost imagine my juices flowing into her mouth; spilling over her cheeks as she continued to lap at me with her talented tongue. Then, quite suddenly, I was coming and it was glorious. I couldn't stop my body from pressing down onto Toni's mouth, seeking out all she could offer.

Somewhere in the back of my brain I feared she would not be able to breathe, but Toni continued to grip firmly onto my hips, pulling me closer to her mouth as I jerked and writhed above her. I had the sudden urge to pull her head towards me and thrust against her. I knew this wanton image would shock me later, but right then, in that moment, it was all I could think of.

The year ended on a real high note. Susie threw a Hogmanay party at her flat and we rang in the bells in full cheer, toasting each other and wishing everyone a happy New Year. We all felt excited and convinced that 1988 would be a very good year for all of us. Cath and Eddie couldn't wait to start working for Toni and get out of the hellhole that had become the *Railwayman's Club*. I had spoken to Jimmy about working for Toni when the bar was ready. He thanked me for

giving him more notice than he could ever expect, while in the next breath he cursed my girlfriend for opening a bar not 200 yards from his own. I found that kind of funny, as there were already two others situated between their respective establishments. If there was one thing you could be sure of in Portobello, it was getting a drink between the hours of 11am and 11pm.

We all toasted the new bar and Toni revealed the name of it for the first time, '*Illicit Still*'. I couldn't help but feel it was very appropriate.

"To the '*Illicit Still*'."

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~ Licit Cusp ~

by weebod

DISCLAIMERS: See [Part 1](#).

FEEDBACK: If you enjoy the story please let me know: weebod@mac.com

Part Six:

Chapter 27

The start of January was a very busy time. Sorting Isobel out had been a priority; she had needed a more permanent place to stay until the flat over the bar was ready. Happily that problem was immediately solved by Toni who declared that Isobel could come and live with her until we all moved into the new flat together. I had spoken to Toni about this afterwards, thanking her. We would have both loved for me to move into her flat instead, but I felt that leaving Isobel at Susie's would not have been fair on either her or Isobel. I was the person she rented the flat to, not my sister. I know Susie would have agreed, but it wouldn't have been right. Isobel seemed more than happy with Toni's offer.

I had discussed with Susie, in the week between Christmas and New Year, the issue of me leaving the flat to go and live with Toni. She had said she couldn't be happier for me. I had felt genuine regret that I would be leaving her flat so soon. I had really enjoyed sharing with her. I

apologised to her for leaving her in a bit of a spot, but she said not to worry, she would find someone else if she needed to.

With Isobel's accommodation problems solved, the next step was finding a General Practitioner who would take her on as a patient and, of course, the issue of her schooling also needed to be resolved. I took her along to my Doctor's surgery in Portobello and fortunately they were in a position to take on new patients. At her appointment two days later she was given a pregnancy test, which confirmed that she was indeed pregnant. Isobel had said there was no doubt about it in her mind as she had skipped two periods, but had the test come back negative, I don't know whether I would have laughed or attempted to strangle her.

It turned out that the baby was due on the nineteenth of June, which I found a little ironic since that just happened to be father's day. Everyone got a little excited upon hearing the due date; it seemed to make the prospect of a new baby all the more real. Until now we had been completely focussed on the problems caused by the pregnancy, now for the first time we were thinking about the end result, a new life. Isobel was over three months pregnant and she would soon be showing.

The next priority was to sort out her continued education. Toni took Isobel to see one of her old teachers from high school; they had kept in touch, seeing each other frequently in and around Portobello. Toni explained that Helen would be the best person to seek advice from. It turns out that the way forward for Isobel was simply to study at home for her exams. Helen explained that joining a new school with her pregnancy about to show would do her more harm than good. The students would be unforgiving and merciless. Helen arranged for Isobel to get all the books and coursework she would need, that only left the issue of where she would sit her exams. Apparently there was a place set-aside specifically for that purpose, where people who were not affiliated to any school or college could apply to the Scottish board of education and pay a small fee to sit their exams. This seemed like the ideal solution, as the room would be full of older students, usually adults looking to go back to college or university. Isobel seemed happy with this outcome, the only stumbling block would be her pregnancy and the hope that she delivered the baby after her exams were finished, if not, well we would cross that bridge when and if we had to.

Isobel made the decision not to apply for university that year. I wondered what the future would hold for her? Having a baby was going to change a lot for her. Would she still go to university? I really didn't know and I don't think Isobel knew either. She no longer had the freedom to do what she wanted; her choices would now all be taken with the baby in mind. Would she still follow through on her career choice? She had been undecided about what she wanted to study when I last asked her. I decided not to enquire, it just didn't seem right, since it may no longer have been possible.

Toni put an idea forward to me that I hadn't considered before. She asked if I wanted to learn to drive. I didn't hesitate to answer 'yes'. I went to the local post office that very afternoon to pick up a form that would enable me to apply for a provisional driving licence. I couldn't wait for it to

arrive so I could get started with my lessons.

With Isobel sorted for her exams and set up with a new Doctor, I put my mind to the upcoming term at university. I would be back at lectures and tutorials within a week and I couldn't wait to get my teeth into the new subject matter. We would be studying the Highland Clearances. A very tragic and brutal period in Scotland's history, when tens of thousands of men, women and children were forcibly and often violently removed from their homes to make way for sheep. The clearances ultimately led to the destruction of the clan system and almost the loss of my beloved Gaelic, *Fuadaich nan Gàidheal*, the expulsion of the Gael, that's what the highlanders called the clearances. Many were forced to emigrate to places such as Nova Scotia and the Carolinas. They were poor people who arrived with little more than the clothes on their backs. I could scarcely imagine a more unjust way to treat your fellow countrymen. Perhaps the upcoming course work would help me understand more about that most dark period in Scottish history.

Toni had a lot to organise. She had put her flat on the market at a fixed price. I asked her if she wouldn't get more money if she waited for offers, but she told me that she just didn't have the time to wait for that process. A fixed price listing would guarantee her a quick sale and money in the bank for refurbishing the new bar. She was getting the keys to the new place at the beginning of February and hoped to have the upstairs flat ready for us to move into by the end of that month. She was going to be very busy once she got the keys, there seemed to be a lot of luck and timing involved in these events. I hoped everything went smoothly. There was a lot of hard work ahead for Toni, as she planned to do as much of the manual labour as she could manage herself. I had told her that Isobel and I would help out whenever we could. We weren't particularly skilled, but could hold a paintbrush if need be, and clean. It didn't matter to us, we vowed to assist Toni in any way we could.

Valentines Day happened to fall on a Sunday that year, which was very fortunate as I had Sunday nights off. Susie and Eddie were away for a romantic weekend and wouldn't be back till the Monday, so I had decided to invite Toni to the flat for our own romantic evening. I had been to the local shops the day before to purchase all the fresh ingredients I would need for a new recipe I wanted to try; I then made a stop in at the local video shop to rent a copy of *Educating Rita*; Susie had recommended it, saying it was a very good film.

I had the table set for two, complete with a crisp linen tablecloth, folded napkins, lit candles and a small floral arrangement for the centre. The meal was almost ready, I just had to remove the baked potatoes from the oven, strain the vegetables and serve the chicken breasts with the wholegrain mustard sauce. I think the food had turned out well. All I needed now was Toni; for once she was actually a little late

The buzzer rang ten minutes later and I let Toni in. She entered the flat cursing the bus for not being on time.

"Bloody buses! Thank God I rarely have to use them, I don't know how you can stand using public transport everyday."

She pecked me on the cheek as she handed me her jacket, along with a beautiful bouquet of flowers and a card.

"Happy Valentine's, Shona."

I thanked her as I returned the greeting, accepting the flowers then going in search of a vase to put them in.

"Something smells heavenly and I'm starving."

"Good, because it's all ready. Take a seat, while I put these flowers in water then I'll serve dinner."

"Why didn't you drive over?" I asked from the kitchen area.

There was no immediate answer as I picked up the dish full of vegetables and put it on to the table. I looked at Toni in expectation.

"Ahh, the Nova has developed a wee problem. It's being towed to the garage tomorrow morning."

I frowned; we had just been in the car that afternoon, Toni giving me my second lesson. Then I recalled the way the gears had crunched as I tried to find reverse while simultaneously pressing down on the clutch pedal. Oh no, this wasn't good.

"It's my fault." I declared, not asking. I knew I had contributed to the problem with my inept attempts at driving.

Toni got up from the table and stood before me, gently grasping my waist.

"No it's not, Shona. I drive that little car to bits. I'm not surprised it's developed a problem."

"Really?" I asked more in hope than genuine belief.

"Really." Toni assured me. "And don't think you are going to be stopping our Sunday afternoon driving lesson, I enjoy teaching you."

Toni knew me too well, I was about to suggest that we stop it and I book driving lessons with the local instructor instead. For the last two Sunday afternoons Toni had driven us to an empty school car park and started to teach me the basics. The plan being that, come the summer, I would have more free time and could book ten lessons and then sit my test. I'm glad one of us was confident, but Toni said most people fail first time and if I happened to be one of them, it

would be good experience. She was the driver so I was going along with her plan. When I asked if she passed first time she said she would tell me after I passed. She could be very sparing with information when she wanted to be, I still hadn't found out what she had studied at college and all Eddie would say when I asked him was that he had been giving me lots of hints, so he was no further help.

We sat down to eat and Toni made encouraging noises about my latest dish, I was quietly pleased, as I really enjoyed trying out new recipes, but there had been the occasional hiccup. There was a pasta dish with blue cheese that hadn't quite gone to plan, but Toni had eaten it anyway, I just couldn't. We had some white wine with the main course and for afters I had prepared a fruit salad, I wanted to keep it light as I planned to enjoy a box of chocolates with Toni while we watched the film.

After dinner I got the video ready and we settled onto the sofa to watch it.

"What film did you get?"

"Educating Rita."

"Oh..."

Toni sounded so deflated, I wondered if she had already seen it and not enjoyed the film.

"You don't like it?"

"No, it's not that...I'm just a little disappointed."

"Have you heard bad things about it? Susie saw it in the cinema and said it was a good movie, she thought you might enjoy it."

I was beginning to worry that my planned evening was quickly falling apart.

"I'm sure I will enjoy it, it's just that I was hoping for something a little more...you know."

Toni raised her eyebrows up and down and I frowned as I tried to work out what she meant. I was beginning to lose a little patience.

"No, I don't know, perhaps you could be a little more explicit?"

"Now you're talking!"

"Toni, what on earth are you saying?" I had lost patience now; my frustration was clearly showing through.

"Well I was hoping for something more raunchy, say like oh I dunno, maybe *Deep Throat* or

Debbie Does Dallas."

My face coloured so quickly I could feel my ears burning red hot. Toni burst out laughing, not able to keep a straight face any longer. She was referring to an incident a few weeks back when Isobel was spending a few days here before she moved to Toni's flat. We had been bored one afternoon and there was nothing much to do with almost everywhere being closed for the holidays. There were a couple of videos in a carrier bag next to the television and I didn't think that Susie would mind if we watched them. I put one on and within minutes both myself and Isobel sat wide eyed staring at the screen before I had the presence of mind to scramble over to the video player and turn it off. It took me three goes before I hit the right button. Isobel then started to howl with laughter. I rewound the video and removed it from the machine with shaky hands before returning it to the bag it came from. I found out later when I talked to Susie about it that the videos belonged to Eddie. She said he should have been more careful and not left them lying around. She didn't seem to mind that he had them and I later wondered just exactly why they were in the flat in the first place, then I decided not to dwell on that thought too long.

I still hadn't said a word to Toni and she was beginning to look a little concerned with my silence.

"I'm sorry, Shona, I shouldn't have teased. I just couldn't resist."

"Who told you?"

"Ehm..."

Toni refused to give up the name of the culprit, but I had my suspicions. I knew Eddie and Toni were very close, but I just didn't think he would tell her that, he always treated me with respect; he could be a real gentleman when he wanted to be, which left one person.

"Isobel." I stated.

Toni didn't deny it and I had my answer. I was already plotting my revenge as we settled down to watch the film. I loved my sister dearly, but she could be a real brat. Between her telling Toni lots of embarrassing things about me, and her constant *borrowing* of my clothes, sometimes I could see her far enough!

We both really enjoyed the film, Susie had been right about it, it was very good, but as usual any mention of Shakespeare's Macbeth, really irked me.

"Lady Macbeth gets such a raw deal because of Shakespeare," I remarked idly.

"How so?"

"Gruach, her real name, was far from the conniving woman driven by demons that is portrayed by Shakespeare. She was a woman most likely driven by self-survival after the death of her husband, Gillacomgain at the hands of Macbeth. This was an act of revenge by Macbeth as

Gillacomgain and his cousin Malcolm, killed Macbeth's father, an act that left Gillacomgain as heir to the title. When Macbeth defeated and killed Gillacomgain, he regained his own inheritance, but also made Gruach a widow in the process. She and Gillacomgain had a son who remained heir and was also therefore a threat to Macbeth. When Macbeth proposed to Gruach, he removed the threat posed by her son Luach, while, at the same time, offering Gruach safety for her and Luach. By all accounts she remained at Macbeth's side till his death seventeen years later, the length of time he remained on the throne, which means he was a very successful King, and she a devoted wife. History says she was a kind and compassionate lady, nothing like the one Shakespeare portrays."

"So why did he portray her that way?"

"For his own gain most likely. The way the characters were written was sure to curry favour with King James. The play seems to celebrate his ancestors. James was the first Scottish king to also rule England, as James I; he was James VI, of Scotland. It's also known that James was interested in the study of witchcraft, so Shakespeare's play hit all the right notes with the new king. It was a very clever work of fiction."

"And in the process, changed our perception of a Scottish king and queen."

"It happens a lot. In history, separating the fact from the fiction can be a very difficult process, but one I enjoy immensely."

"I can tell." Toni smiled and pulled me towards her for a kiss.

"Life just never seems to stop for us, does it?" I was lying in Toni's lap, looking up at her as she soothingly ran her fingers through my hair. She had been working really hard getting our new flat ready. Isobel and myself had been helping but Toni was the one in there every day.

"It's certainly been non stop since the start of January, and it's not going to let up for a good while yet."

"I know, but all the hard work will be worth it when you get the bar up and running."

"I hope so." Toni paused in thought, "Sometimes I wonder if I haven't bitten off more than I can chew. If the bar fails, we have nothing. I'll be ruined financially and we won't even have a roof over our heads."

It was almost strange to hear Toni talk this way. She was by nature a very positive person. This was a rare glimpse into another side of her character. I suppose we all had doubts, but Toni had never voiced hers before. Then again, she had never committed herself to such a large project before. Her home and business all wrapped up in the one financial deal. I could see where the concern was coming from.

"Toni, I know you are going to make a success of the bar. I have absolutely no doubt."

"Thanks for having faith in me, it means a lot."

"You were born to do this kind of thing."

She laughed. "Just like you were born to do history."

"Something like that." I playfully sank my teeth into her thigh; the denim making sure it wouldn't hurt.

"Behave," she reprimanded. "You know, when the bar is running smoothly and making enough money, the first thing I want to do is take you on holiday."

My head immediately jerked up at that thought. "Really?" I was excited at the prospect having never been on holiday.

"Yes, it's been ages since I had a proper holiday - what about you?"

"Ah, I've never actually been anywhere on holiday."

Toni moved me into a sitting position and gave me a serious look. "Well that's something we will have to change. Is there anywhere you would really like to go, anything you would really like to see?"

I didn't hesitate. "Paris."

Toni nodded her approval. "Do you want to travel by boat or plane?"

I smiled. "I've always wanted to fly."

"Then that's what we will do, fly to Paris for a romantic holiday."

I gave Toni a kiss. "Thank you."

"You're most welcome."

She settled her longer body down to lie alongside mine, so we were both stretched out, as always her feet dangling off the edge of the settee.

"That could be a long way off you know, is there anything you want to do closer to home? Somewhere you want to go?"

There was somewhere I wanted to go, the thought had been running round in my head ever since Christmas.

"Well, there is somewhere," I said a little hesitantly.

"Go on," Toni encouraged.

"I've been thinking about the joke you made on Christmas evening, about Portobello not being ready for a gay bar."

"Uhuh."

"I've never been to one."

Toni pursed her lips as she took in that information.

"So, you would like me to take you to a gay bar?"

I nodded slowly, and then said more definitely, "Yes - yes, I would."

"Okay...it won't be like any bar you have ever been to before." She cautioned.

I nodded, "Okay."

"And we will most likely bump into women I have, er, dated."

"How likely?" I scowled.

"I would say, definitely."

I considered that for a moment. "That's fine, I can live with that." I hoped.

Toni wasn't convinced and honestly, I didn't blame her after my previous displays of jealousy.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," I replied firmly.

"Then it's a date. I'll take you to the best gay bar in Edinburgh, on one condition..."

"Name it."

"You don't walk around looking shocked."

"Why would I do that?"

"Wait and see," she replied cryptically.

As I lay beside her the thought kept running around in my head, what could be so shocking about

a gay bar?"

At the end of February the three of us moved into the flat above the bar. Toni had worked so hard to get it ready, because she wanted the move to coincide with the date she was leaving her flat in Musselburgh. That was on a Monday so she had two days to empty out her flat. Isobel and myself were easy to move, we really only had our clothes and books to worry about. Toni had furniture, so she had hired a van to move it all.

With the help of some strong guys, the move was finished by Saturday evening. I was working, so I wasn't around to witness some of the chaos trying to get beds and sofas up the staircase that led from the bar to the upstairs flat. When I got home from *The Fern* that night, Toni and Isobel were sound asleep. They had obviously been very busy, as all that seemed to be left was the unpacking of boxes. All the furniture was in place. The flat was looking lovely with its fresh coat of paint and new kitchen and bathroom installed. A lot of the appliances were so old they had to be replaced. The skip that had stood outside for the past month, collecting the rubbish from the flat as Toni worked on it, had been removed and would be brought back empty for her to start filling it again with the rubbish from the bar this time. We may have got the actual move over with, but now the really hard work began, downstairs. Toni estimated three months. Working on a budget she had to do as much of the work herself as she could. Tradesmen would only be employed if and when it was completely necessary. Other than that it was Toni and any friend she could rope into doing the odd job for her.

As the weeks went by, the bar actually started to look worse. We were living above a building site. Toni would be there from eight in the morning, often till I dragged her upstairs to bed at night. The only quality time we were spending together was in bed, and Toni was usually fast asleep the minute her head hit the pillow.

I talked her into having a day off for Isobel's eighteenth birthday. Isobel was six months pregnant, and looking every bit of it. It was so strange to see her that way, it often made me smile at the wonder of it all. Obviously alcohol was out of the question for Isobel, so we decided to go for a meal at the local Italian restaurant. There was me and Toni, Eddie and Susie. I had gone shopping with Isobel earlier in the week to help find her a new outfit, it wasn't easy, but she looked cute in her dungarees and top. It was practical and comfortable and that was getting to be the most that Isobel could hope for as the baby continued to grow inside her.

"Happy Birthday, Isobel." Everyone chorused.

I handed her the gift that was from all of us. Isobel opened the card that contained £100 worth of vouchers for *Mothercare*, a large department store that stocked everything you could ever need for mother and baby. Isobel was overwhelmed. The truth is she had no money, and would never

have been able to afford anything new for the baby, but Toni and I had spoken about this many times and between us, we would make sure she had everything she and the baby would require.

"Thanks, everyone," she said with tears in her eyes.

Toni and I had got her some personal items too, and a parcel had arrived from my Gran that morning full of baby things. From hand knitted cardigans to bibs and shawls. Isobel and the baby were going to be fine.

In the following weeks items began to appear, first there was a cot, then a pram. Isobel's room was starting to look like a nursery, and we really appreciated everything that was being donated to us. There were items from Susie's friends at work and even people we had never met before were being extremely generous and it warmed my heart. We made sure to send our thanks to everyone helping us. Toni knew a lot of people and, luckily Cath had held on to a lot of the items she had bought when her children were babies. She had been very generous.

The bar was finally beginning to take shape. Toni still said she would have it ready for the end of June that was two months away; I was finally beginning to see a light at the end of the tunnel. Both Isobel and myself were studying hard for our respective exams and Toni continued to work all the hours God sent in the bar. Eddie was there a lot too, he couldn't wait to get out of the *Railwaymen's Club* as things had gone from bad to worse, with profits way down and money disappearing left and right. The current committee was running the place into the ground. I felt sad for the people who really enjoyed socialising there. I said as much to Toni but she had little sympathy, instead muttering something about a bulldozer and building flats.

Chapter 28

I couldn't believe Isobel had gotten so big. She was due in four weeks and was looking very pregnant. I was amazed, looking at her sitting in the armchair watching television with her hands resting on her large bump. The poor thing had swollen ankles, so I had put her feet up on a footstool and given them a rub. She was constantly in pain or discomfort from one body part or another, having great difficulty finding a comfortable position to sit in or sleep in.

"Oh."

I looked up at Isobel, slightly panicked.

"What? What is it?"

She giggled, as she rubbed her tummy. "Relax, Shona, it was just a sharp kick."

I moved up to her stomach and laid my hand near the area she had rubbed. Isobel moved my hand to the exact spot. Then I felt it, another kick. We had done this many times now, but it never ceased to amaze me. There was a little life inside my sister and it wouldn't be long now until we got to meet them in person.

I kissed the area that the baby was kicking and spoke a few words in Gaelic.

"You're going to be a terrific Auntie, Shona."

"And you are going to be a fantastic mother," I reassured.

I knew it was a source of great anxiety for Isobel. The prospect of having a new life to look after, but I had no doubt that she was more than capable.

We both looked up suddenly as we heard the sounds of a scuffle outside. Something about it just made my blood run cold and I ran to the window overlooking the bar door. There below to my absolute horror were Toni and Eddie being beaten by four men. I screamed and ran for the stairs.

"Call the police, Isobel!"

In a blind panic I ran to the side bar door, I could hear the dull blows as they connected with another body. I would always remember that sound and every time it left me feeling sick. I threw open the door, to see Toni on her knees and Eddie lying on the ground.

I immediately threw my body over Eddie to protect him from further hurt.

"Leave them. Please leave them alone," I begged their attackers.

I heard Toni say my name, it sounded raspy, she was clearly in a lot of pain, but Eddie wasn't even moving.

"Come on boys, our work here is done."

I watched in horror as the one who had spoken walked towards Toni and lifted her head up by the hair.

"Message received?" he asked menacingly.

I could see her in the streetlight, blood pouring from a cut below her eye, she looked so proud and undefeated. I couldn't believe it when I heard her defiant reply, like some bloodied Highland warrior.

"Never."

I let out a scream, as he was about to strike her beautiful face again. A blow, which, much to my relief, never landed, as his accomplices started shouting that the police were arriving. I looked behind me and could see them running on foot out of the police station, which was only five hundred yards away.

The men quickly ran off and I was left for a few seconds with nothing but silence, I couldn't move. When the police arrived they stopped and gently coaxed me to stand up from my protective position over Eddie's limp body. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. I was in a daze.

The police cars sped past in chase of the attackers, sirens blaring. The ones who were on foot were administering first aid to Toni and checking Eddie for a pulse. I just stood against the wall, frozen.

I became aware of a woman screaming, it was Susie. Izzie must have telephoned her. She was trying to get to Eddie, but a policeman was holding her back, trying to calm her down, assuring her that he was breathing and the ambulance was on its way. I could hear Toni answering questions being put to her. 'No' she didn't recognise her attackers. She told the police they had west coast accents, probably Glaswegian.

"Shona! Oh my God, what happened?"

Susie was at my side, crying, she was shaking like a leaf.

I just looked at her, struggling to find my voice. She shook me.

"What happened?"

"I...I don't know. I was upstairs with Isobel when we heard a commotion. I looked out of the window and saw four men beating Eddie and Toni. I ran down, Susie. I got here as fast as I could..." I was crying now, the numbness of my initial shock beginning to subside.

"I tried to protect him, but it was already too late."

"Shhh, I know, I know."

We could hear the ambulance sirens getting closer; thank goodness they were almost here. Susie and I watched as the paramedics assessed Eddie before putting him onto a stretcher and then into the ambulance. Toni got in with him, reluctant to be treated, but she needed to be seen regardless of what she thought.

Susie attempted to get into the ambulance with them, but was informed there was no space for her. I took her by the hand and led her away. A policewoman intercepted me.

"We need to ask you a few questions." I recognised her from *The Fern*. I had forgotten her name, but I knew she and Toni had dated.

"We want to get going to the hospital."

"I know," she said, not unkindly. "Just a few minutes of your time, then you can go."

I answered her questions as best as I could, but there really wasn't much I could tell her. I was able to give a good description of the man who pulled Toni up by the hair, other than that I couldn't help any further.

"How are we going to get to the hospital?" Susie asked.

"I have a spare set of keys for the Nova, I'll drive us."

"Shona, you haven't passed your driving test yet."

"I think I can get us to the hospital."

Susie took the keys from me with a shake of her head. "You will have yourself a driving ban before you even pass. Come on, get in."

I was amazed that Susie was even able to drive, given the fright she had just had, but the need to get to the hospital and see Eddie seemed to galvanise her.

Susie was a good driver, and got us there safely, which was probably a lot more than I would have done. We parked and immediately headed to the Accident and Emergency department, which was where we found Toni, sitting waiting to be treated.

"Hi." I said tentatively. I winced when Toni turned her head to look at me. Her beautiful face was a mess. There was the gash I had seen earlier, that was definitely going to need stitches. Her eye was swollen and her nose looked like it may have been broken. I didn't even want to think about what lay hidden beneath her clothing.

"Hi." She looked despondent.

"How's Eddie?" This was from Susie; she must have been worried sick.

"I don't know yet. When we arrived, they took him straight through. I haven't heard anything since."

Susie left us to go in search of information, leaving Toni and I sitting in silence; I honestly didn't know what to say to her. I decided instead that I would call Isobel, as she would be very concerned.

It was almost an hour before Toni was treated. In that time she had gingerly made her way to the public telephone to call Eddie's parents. He was conscious, thank goodness. He had been treated

for his superficial injuries and was now under observation because of a concussion. There was a lot of bruising on his body including his ribs, but nothing was broken.

Toni had been x-rayed and stitched. She did have a broken nose and a sprained wrist, along with a lot of bruising and some superficial cuts. All in all, I thought they were both very lucky to escape with just the injuries they had.

Toni, Susie and myself left the hospital some three hours later. The journey home was very quiet; we were all tired and shaken up from the events of that evening. When Toni and I got back to the flat, we found Isobel sound asleep in her armchair; she had obviously tried to stay up to await our return.

I gave her a gentle shake. "Isobel."

"Oh, you're home. Thank goodness. How is everyone?"

"Eddie has been kept in hospital. He has a concussion so they want to keep him under observation. He also has bruised ribs, but nothing is broken and he will heal in time."

"What about Toni?"

My girlfriend had gone straight to the bathroom, so was nowhere in sight.

"She's home. A few cuts and bruises. A broken nose and a sprained wrist."

"It's terrible that someone would attack them."

I heard the bathroom door open, but Toni headed straight for our bedroom.

"I know. Come on; let's get you to bed. It's been a long night."

I awoke the next morning to find Toni's side of the bed empty. I assumed she had gone to the bathroom but after ten minutes, there was still no sign of her. It was a little after eight in the morning and I had already decided the night before that I was going to skip university for the first time ever to look after Toni for that day. Ever more curious and concerned where she had got to; I got up and went in search of her.

Not finding her anywhere in the flat, I ventured downstairs and there she was, varnishing wood and listening to INXS' *Kick*, just as if it were any other morning. But this wasn't any other morning and I could see the pain from her injuries etched across her battered face.

"What on earth are you doing?"

She turned to look at me. "I'm getting the bar ready." She went back to varnishing the piece of

wood she was working on.

"You're hurt, Toni. You should be resting, letting yourself heal."

"No, I need to be right here, showing whoever was responsible for last night that I won't be intimidated."

"You need to be upstairs letting me take care of you!" I was mad at her.

She continued to do her varnishing. It seemed she was serious about carrying on as normal. Obviously she had a point to prove, but I certainly did not agree with it. I left her and headed back upstairs, as the strains of *Never Tear Us Apart* rang out in my ears.

I spent the next two nights at Susie's. Isobel knew where to find me if she needed me. I was too angry with Toni to be around her. I worked as usual in *The Fern* on the Friday and Saturday night. A lot of the regulars were enquiring after Toni and Eddie's health. I was able to tell them they were both doing well. Eddie had been released from hospital on the Friday afternoon, with strict instructions to get lots of rest and take it easy for a while. Obviously that same advice from the hospital fell on deaf ears when it came to my stubborn, pig-headed girlfriend.

I was still angry on Sunday. I knew she was still working away on the renovations as I had heard her praised often enough in *The Fern* over the weekend. People were full of admiration for her stand of defiance and her ability to get right back in there, even when she was bloodied and had been beaten up. I failed to agree with them. I just saw the woman I loved in pain. She needed to rest and take care of herself.

Sunday afternoon I was still at Susie's. She had gone to visit Eddie, which left me alone in the flat. I heard the buzzer and absentmindedly permitted the person entrance. People were always forgetting their keys or needing access during the day. I was surprised when I heard a knock at the front door. I looked through the spy hole and saw Toni standing on the other side.

I opened the door and stared at her. She looked a little better than when I had last seen her, on Friday morning, but the bruising was awful and her nose was still looking strange. It needed to be straightened, as it had shifted to the left, and she was due to have it reset the following Tuesday.

"Can I come in?"

I nodded and opened the door wider to allow her entrance.

I followed her into the living room, where we both took a seat, Toni on one sofa and me on the

other, it spoke volumes about the current state of our relationship.

"How are you?" I asked. I did genuinely care.

"I've been better, but I've also been worse." She attempted a smile, but it turned into a wince, it must have hurt.

"You've certainly looked better." My answer allowed some of my anger to show through, I couldn't keep it at bay.

"Shona, I know you're angry with me right now, but I want you to come home, please?"

"Toni, you and your best friend were badly beaten up by a gang of thugs. Then the very next morning when you should have been resting, you were back down in the bar working."

"I know, but I needed to show that I wouldn't be put off."

"And what if they come back? What about next time? Isobel is going to be giving birth in a month!"

"I'll protect us, I promise you - we will all be fine."

"You don't know that! You can't make that promise. This time you and Eddie are going to be okay, what about next time?"

"There won't *be* a next time."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because it's being taken care of."

I stared at her, wondering exactly what that meant. Were we about to become involved in some sort of violent turf war? I didn't like this one bit.

"Does this involve more violence, is someone else going to find their husband or boyfriend or lover on the pavement battered and bloody?"

"There is more than one way to skin a cat." Toni replied cryptically.

"What exactly does that mean? I'm fed up being on the outside, Toni, You need to tell me exactly what we are involved in!" I was so angry with her.

"Okay, I'm sorry, you're right. I'll tell you everything."

I sat back and listened as Toni explained that the police were tipped off as to who was behind the hiring of the henchmen. It would be difficult to press charges, but as Toni had said, there was

more than one way to skin a cat. Every bar needed a licence to operate and his was just about to be revoked. Without it, he couldn't sell alcohol so there would be no point in even opening his bar.

"Did you know - I mean when you bought the bar, that this might happen?"

"It was always a possibility that someone wouldn't be happy."

"So it could happen again?"

"It's highly unlikely now, especially when this publican loses his licence, it will send a message to anyone else who has any thoughts about getting heavy."

"I just can't believe that people would have you beaten for wanting to start a business."

"I'm competition, Shona - they were trying to scare me off."

I shook my head. "I don't understand the violence."

"I know you don't," she said compassionately.

Toni moved closer to me and I welcomed it.

"I'm asking you not to give up on me, not now, please. We have come so far."

She was right, we had come very far, and she was now only weeks away from finally achieving her dream. I couldn't give up on her now but, in the future, I was going to make sure that Toni kept me fully informed of any risks.

"So what do we do?"

"We pick ourselves up and keep going." She hesitated, "So will you come home?"

"Yes."

And, with that, Toni helped me pack up the few belongings I had hastily thrown into an overnight bag when I'd left and we walked back, hand in hand to the *Illicit Still*.

Chapter 29

I sat tapping my biro pen silently against my cheek as I read over my final written exam. I was in the Playfair library hall. It was a stunning piece of architecture, with a barrel-vaulted ceiling. I had stood in awe the first time I laid eyes on it. I checked my watch, there were eleven minutes

left. I continued to look over my paper; I would never leave an exam early, every moment was precious.

Time was called and we were instructed to set down our writing tools and pass our papers to the front. I knew I had prepared well for all my exams, but I always felt nervous beforehand, now I felt mentally drained. They were over for another year, unless I had any re-sits; no more studying until late September.

I stood up from my seat and gathered my pens, putting them into my bag. I was anxious to get home to Isobel, the poor thing was four days past her due date and she was absolutely miserable. Everything was a challenge for her, whether it was getting up from a chair, or out of the bath, she needed help with most things.

I walked to the exit, everyone leaving at the same time had created a queue to get out of the doors, I may have been in a hurry, but I didn't intend to push my way through like some had. It never ceased to amaze me how rude people could be. As I stepped through the doors into the darkened corridor, I felt a tug on my arm and the next thing I knew I was facing Toni. I immediately panicked, only one thing would get her away from the bar to wait outside an examination room for me and that was Isobel going into labour.

"Is she?"

"Yes, she's in labour. I dropped her off at the Maternity ward, and headed over here. That was about twenty minutes ago."

I started to make my way out of the building onto South Bridge. We were only a five-minute walk from the hospital, but I immediately set off at a run with Toni easily catching me. The Edinburgh Royal Infirmary was a big place, but fortunately, Toni knew exactly where the maternity wards were located. I had to get to Isobel; I couldn't leave her to go through any of this on her own.

When we got to the labour ward, Isobel looked completely relieved to see us, then a powerful contraction hit just as we got over to her bed. I watched as my sister went through the pain. There was a baby monitor strapped to her middle and she was wired up to a machine, which was monitoring the baby's vital signs, the heartbeat was constant and rapid. I assumed this was a good thing; otherwise surely the staff would be doing something?

"Oh, thank goodness you're here, Shona." The contraction over, Isobel finally spoke.

"Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to be here till you have that baby." I reassured her.

Worried that the baby could arrive at any minute; it had been days since we had last left Isobel on her own and I was grateful that Toni was always around when I'd had to be somewhere else.

"So what happened?"

"My waters broke." Isobel answered me. Rather impatiently, I thought, but she was about to have a baby and I suppose it was a daft question.

Toni filled in the gaps.

"I was downstairs in the bar when I heard Isobel call me. As soon as she said her waters had broken, I got her downstairs and into the car."

"Thank you."

"No need for thanks."

Another contraction hit and I felt nothing but sympathy for my little sister.

"Is there anything you need, Isobel?"

She relaxed back onto the bed before answering. "I'm fine."

Time seemed to pass so slowly as we waited there by her hospital bed. A nurse would stop by periodically and check Isobel, then tell her it would be a little while yet, whatever that meant. I found it difficult to sit and wait while my sister went through this, and the worst was yet to come.

After a while, there was a flurry of activity. Isobel had expressed a strong desire to push. I immediately contacted a nurse who examined her again, and this time the reaction was completely different. Whereas before they would examine her internally and then reassure her, this time it was all systems go, my sister really was ready to deliver!

We were moved en masse to the delivery room, I stayed with Isobel the entire time. She was absolutely terrified, I could see the panicked look in her eyes, but despite this she remained brave and strong, doing as the doctors and nurses encouraged. I think the gas and air was helping a lot, I shut out the cuss words after the first couple. I could forgive the ones aimed at me given the circumstances. I continued to hold her hand and encourage her, it wasn't easy to watch my younger sister in pain, but I kept thinking that this was the most natural thing in the world; women were made to do this, it would all be fine. And eventually it was.

Isobel delivered a healthy baby boy. He weighed in at seven pounds and three ounces and had all the required fingers and toes. The sight of her new son transformed my sister. I expected exhaustion but instead she was euphoric. I was too; I was so proud of Isobel and so happy.

Isobel was a mother! I was an auntie! I had a nephew! Oh no, my legs felt wobbly...

Isobel stayed in hospital for five days. I went to see her every day and by the end of it she was desperate to get home. The time in hospital had been good for her as she had been instructed by the nursing staff on the best ways to handle and care for 'Jack', that was the name she had settled on. Breast-feeding was becoming less and less awkward for her and I could see her confidence, when it came to handling little Jack, increase on a daily basis. I think I was more nervous about them coming home than Isobel was. Toni was very practical about the entire thing, which was probably just as well, since I hadn't given a thought as to what Isobel would need back at the flat. Toni, on the other hand, had been talking to Cath, and she had lots of suggestions, which was a great help, since neither Isobel, myself nor Toni had any real experience when it came to new-born babies and motherhood; we were all learning as we went along.

Thank goodness our exams were over as the late nights were very tiring. Isobel initially handled all of Jack's feeds, but I talked her into expressing her breast milk so that I could help out; knowing that, otherwise, my poor sister was going to be constantly exhausted.

Jack was our little miracle. Sometimes I would just look at Isobel when she held him and I was in complete awe. There was no feeling like it; I could only imagine how Isobel herself felt. If it were even a fraction more than the feelings I had then she was very lucky indeed. I would look at her face as she gazed at the little bundle and I saw nothing but love and devotion there. I couldn't help but think about motherhood and myself. Had I given away the right to have a baby? Would it be acceptable? I couldn't have a child with Toni, at least not one that would carry her genes along with mine. I felt a certain sadness at that, however that was life. There were alternatives and perhaps sometime in the future I would explore them. For now I was more than happy to share in my sister's happiness. She really was going to be a terrific mother.

We had a lot of visitors that first week, all popping in to see the new baby. Isobel was overwhelmed with the continued generosity of the people around us. They brought cards and gifts for the baby. The little outfits for Jack were especially cute.

Some of the *Railwaymen's Club* members that we bumped into around Portobello also popped in to see the new mum and baby and Toni's dad Keith had come along with Mary, who he was still dating. She really was a lovely woman, and was having a very positive influence on Keith. His drinking habits were improving. He no longer felt the need to indulge in the binge drinking sessions he had taken to on his days off. I knew Toni was pleased with this new development, but she didn't say too much. I suppose it must be strange seeing your father with another woman, but as Toni herself had said, life goes on.

With less than a week to go, Toni was hard at work with the final preparations for Saturday's opening night. The name of the bar was finally up outside, and it was thrilling to see '*Illicit Still*'

in gold lettering on the freshly painted burgundy exterior, it looked very elegant. Toni had dropped flyers all around town advertising the opening night and the free drinks promotion that she had organised as an added attraction to bring in the customers. She had also had a large banner made for the outside of the bar advertising the same thing. The entertainment that night would be a covers band that had played the *Railwaymen's Club*, not long after I started working there. I remembered that the lead singer had flirted with Toni; it had really irked me even though, at the time, we weren't yet involved. I vowed to myself that I wouldn't get jealous if it happened again and would remember what Toni had told me at the time, 'its just business'.

I looked around the fully refurbished bar on Thursday evening when Toni declared that the finishing touches had all been applied, and she had received the appropriate documents from the local council board of inspection and the fire department. She was ready to open; I had suspected though, that she would continue to check over everything right up until she opened the doors for business.

Toni had worked so hard to get to this stage. Essentially, with the bar being on a corner it was 'L' shaped inside. The flooring comprising a deep, ruby red carpet that gave way to a beech wooden floor near the stage at the far end of the pub. This meant people would have a place to dance when there was live entertainment. The bar itself was very long, with a generous amount of working space behind it. A long, polished piece of oak wood ran along the bar top for a good thirty feet before it curved at one end. It was beautiful to look at, and I really liked the combination of matching oak chairs and tables. The walls were covered with cream paint and adorned with pictures of Portobello from the turn of the century. I loved seeing the trams and there was one of the old pier. Near the stage, on the wall, was my absolute favourite item, a jukebox that played compact discs! I didn't yet own a compact disc player, but I hoped to sometime.

Toni had come back from the bank that morning laden with lots of coins to create a float for the bar, keeping the excess in the safe for whenever the tills ran low. She found Isobel and myself downstairs with Jack, feeding fifty pence coins into the jukebox to play all the latest songs. After laughing at our shenanigans she told us not to waste our money and then showed me how to get the jukebox to play for free, stating it was a perk of sleeping with the owner. Isobel laughed at the look on my face, then I laughed along with them, they were incorrigible at times.

It was great to see both Isobel and Toni in good spirits, one having just given birth and the other having just endured months of very hard work that included a severe beating along the way. I actually thought Toni had lost some weight and intended to feed her up a little; she could do with gaining a few pounds. She and Eddie had both made a full recovery, the only remnants of the attack being the one-inch scar below Toni's left eye and the slightest of bumps on what was before, a straight nose.

Toni made some selections, then grabbed me by the hands and danced around with me to Belinda Carlisle's - *'Heaven Is A Place On Earth'* much to the delight of Isobel, who clapped along to the beat.

When opening night arrived, Toni was nervous. I had never seen her display any real anxiety before, but there was no doubting its presence. She kept checking and re-checking the bar, everything from the stock to the money in the tills. Then, after she did that, she would go and check the toilets for the umpteenth time to make sure all the cubicles had toilet paper.

When I could stand it no longer, I finally marched her upstairs for something to eat; I knew she wouldn't get a bite after the bar opened for business.

Cath and Eddie arrived early, but in all honesty, there was nothing for them to do, Toni had been so thorough, right down to organising the cold buffet that would be available throughout the evening. We all stood in the bar having little to do but twiddle our thumbs until the doors opened at 6pm. Eddie kept things lively with his jokes, often at Cath's expense, but she never seemed to mind and took his constant teasing in good spirits.

With less than fifteen minutes to go I could feel the excitement building amongst the four of us, I had really been looking forward to us all working together again. Toni hadn't employed a glass washer instead she had installed a new state of the art machine that would do most of the job for us. All you had to do was stack it with dirty glasses, press a button, wait a few minutes, then open the door and pop the now clean glasses back onto the appropriate shelves. Toni had said it would pay for itself in the long run.

Finally the doors opened and we all stood behind the bar and waited...

Well, it wasn't like a queue was ever going to form outside for the opening of a pub, but an hour later business really started to pick up and two hours later the bar was full, with standing room only.

Chapter 30

"I have a night free on Thursday."

I was shocked Toni was saying this. I couldn't recall the last time I heard those words. The bar had been open for almost three weeks and she had yet to take a night off.

"You have?"

"Uhuh."

"Do you have any plans?"

"Well I seem to recall you making a request some time ago, one I haven't been able to fulfil...till now."

I was intrigued, but I had no idea what she was referring to.

"I did?"

"You asked me to take you to a gay bar."

Now I remembered, it had been so long ago I had forgotten.

I nodded, "I remember."

"So, you still want to go?"

"I do."

"It's a date, be ready at nine."

"Nine? Isn't that a bit late?"

"No, that's early."

I was so excited I called Susie and she dragged me into town shopping.

"You haven't been out with Toni in so long, we need to get her going."

"But she is going, she asked me."

Susie rolled her eyes. "I mean get her *going*, as in can't keep her hands off you. You are going to be in a bar, where almost every other woman is a lesbian. You're going to look knockout!"

Oh, dear god, maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all. What if Toni liked the look of someone else, What if someone liked the look of her? I could see where Susie was coming from; I was going to have to look totally *knockout*.

We shopped till we dropped, according to Susie, and by the end of the afternoon, I had my outfit. It was different, but Susie assured me it would work. Next item on the agenda was to make a hairdresser's appointment for Thursday afternoon. I would be getting a cut and blow dry, and then I would be going back to Susie's to get ready. She said it was best that Toni didn't see me till she actually picked me up that evening.

"Honestly, Shona, it's not that bad."

Susie was trying to convince me that the hairdressing disaster I had just sat through was okay. I knew it wasn't, there was no way I wanted to go out with my hair looking like Carol Decker's

after she stuck her finger in an electric socket! I had big hair...really big hair.

My natural curls had been 'scrunch' dried and goodness only knew what the hairdresser had done to it with the scissors. This was a disaster. I went to Susie's bathroom to shower and to attempt to restore some normality to my hair but after an hour, it was clear that nothing was going to work. The cut was the problem.

"I can't go out."

"I'm sure we can do something, I'll get some clasps and maybe with a little more hairsp..."

Susie didn't bother to finish the word as she caught the glare I sent her way. No more hairspray would be touching my hair that day.

Eddie was sitting reading the newspaper when he made a suggestion from behind the printed sheets.

"Call Toni."

We both looked at him in disbelief. Shona removed the newspaper so she could see him.

"Have you lost your mind? She wants to look great for Toni, not call her over to see the disaster...er difficulty she is having with her new haircut."

Eddie simply shrugged, "I gave you the answer, it's up to you."

Susie frowned and muttered something about men as she went in search of clasps. I swear I saw Eddie giggle from behind the paper. He folded it and looked at me. He took a close look at my new haircut and then nodded.

"No clasp is going to fix that, don't worry, Shona, you shall go to the ball, be back in a few minutes."

I frowned at him, he and Toni could be so frustrating at times and they were so cryptic. Susie returned, wondering where he'd gone.

"He said no clasp is going to fix my hair, told me not to worry, made a Cinderella reference then left."

"Weird." she declared. I had to agree.

Susie had a go with the clasps but nothing was working. Then Eddie returned...with Toni!

"Eddie!" Susie chastised, but he didn't seem fazed.

I looked at Toni and burst into tears.

"It's a disaster!" I howled.

Toni lifted my chin up and had a good look.

"That it is."

"Toni, I think she could do with a little support." This came from Susie.

Eddie was laughing now, I don't know what he found so funny. And Susie started on him instead.

Toni then produced a pair of scissors and I decided enough was enough. They had had their fun.

"Okay, that's it, the joke is over."

Toni sat me in a kitchen chair, and when she started to come at me with *her* scissors, I panicked. My hair was bad enough already.

"What are you doing?" I practically jumped out of the chair.

Toni put her hands on my shoulders to keep me in place. "Trust me, Shona, I can fix your hair.'

"Toni, I know you are good at many things, but I don't think I can let you cut my hair."

"Yes you can, I'm a trained hairdresser."

"A hairdresser!" Susie and I said this in unison we were astonished.

"How do you think Eddie's hair always looks so good? I'm not cutting it anymore by the way, Edward. You will no longer be keeping my secret. I've been blackmailed enough by you."

Eddie looked aghast, "Aww, come on, Toni, you wouldn't make me go to the local barber?" he pleaded.

She just raised an eyebrow at him, she would.

Toni, it turned out, genuinely was a trained hairdresser and a very good one at that. Finally, the mystery of her college course had been solved. She made a terrific job of rescuing my 'haircut from hell', as it had been quickly dubbed, and though my hair was a bit shorter than I would have normally chosen to wear it, I had to admit it did look good. I did miss some of my curls though, but they would grow back in time.

Toni left straight after finishing my hair and said she'd be back at 9pm to pick me up. That gave me two hours to get ready, plenty of time I thought, but not according to Susie. She declared that

we had to get a move on, there was still so much to be done. I couldn't think what but, two hours later, I finally understood why some women took hours to get ready. I doubted I would ever have the skill or patience to attempt it by myself, but I had to admit that my make-up did look nice, I still wasn't sure about the painted finger and toe nails though, but I did enjoy the two glasses of wine I had. Susie said it was to loosen me up and I think it worked.

Susie insisted that she herself would open the door to Toni when she arrived. I was standing in the living room awaiting my inspection. Susie had said that Toni was going to have a tough job on her hands tonight, keeping other women away from me. I just giggled at the thought then frowned, I was sure she was kidding. Then again, if the look on Toni's face was anything to go by maybe Susie was on to something.

Toni walked into the room smiling, I don't think I will ever forget the way the expression on her face transformed from a look of shock to out and out want. I had seen that look before but never in presence of another person, we were always alone. As we walked out the door Susie grabbed me and whispered in my ear.

"I told you." She sounded so excited, like it was a job well done. I decided I could learn a lot from Susie if I was so inclined.

We drove to an area of the city I hadn't been in before. On the outskirts of Edinburgh's New Town with all its grand Georgian architecture, almost leading into the exclusive Stockbridge area, was what Toni described as Edinburgh's best gay bar, *'The Laughing Duck'*.

We walked past the two bomber jacketed bouncers into the bar. It was bright, which I think surprised me. The room was long and reasonably narrow, with black velvet covered booths lining each wall and a row of glass tables and metal chairs facing them. There was a bar straight ahead, where the room then opened out and extended further back. I could hear a disco beat playing in the background, it wasn't loud and it was easy to make conversation as a lot of people were doing in groups or couples sitting or standing around. It was busy, but not intimidating.

A couple of women stopped and spoke with Toni, she immediately introduced me as her girlfriend and we all shook hands. Toni was catching up on the latest news and what they had been up to and she then invited the two women, who were called Irene and Mags, down to the *Illicit Still* one night for a drink. I was really enjoying this date; it wasn't what I expected at all, especially after the things Toni had previously said. We went further into the bar where an older gentleman Toni obviously knew spotted her.

"Toni, darling! Where have you been hiding yourself?"

Before Toni had a chance to answer, he continued, "Oh, my. Who is this divine young thing?"

He gave Toni a big smile and a look I found hard to describe, perhaps it might have been called 'saucy'.

Toni laughed at his antics. "Brian, this is Shona, my girlfriend. Shona, meet Brian, my uncle."

Yes, I saw it immediately; Brian was Keith's brother, albeit an entirely more refined version, but I could see the resemblance. The idea of Keith and Brian both growing up in the same household struck me as strangely humorous. One looking like a rough lumberjack and the other, well I could only say that, even with my small island background, Brian was without a doubt a gay man, I hadn't really met any before that moment, but I supposed he would be perhaps considered stereotypical. He was genuinely flamboyant.

Toni and Brian started to laugh at the look on my face. "I know it's a shock, sweet pea, especially since you have met my older brother."

I nodded, the Martin's were just full of surprises.

"Listen girls I have to run, I have my eye on a bit of co..." Brian stopped short at the glare Toni gave him. "Oh, behave, Toni, she will have heard worse around you. Haven't you, Shona?"

I just smiled my answer; I didn't want to rat Toni out.

"Aye, I thought as much."

"Go get your man, I'll chat with you later if you're still around."

"Oh, I love it when you get all butch."

"Behave yourself."

"Me, never. Bye girls." With a quick wave, Brian left us in search of someone.

Although I felt at times as though they were all talking another language I found it fascinating. We spent an hour in the bar, but I had noticed a lot of people coming in and disappearing downstairs and I had assumed it was the toilets.

"Are you ready for your real education?"

"Huh?"

Toni took my hand, "Come on."

She led me downstairs. The walls were painted black and all I could see was a black door at the bottom, with a muted bass sound coming through it. As soon as Toni opened the door, I was immediately hit with a blast of noise and hot air. We walked in and my real education that evening began.

The music was loud, but not like the Night Club I had been to, this wasn't a disco with men shuffling their feet to pop tunes. This was a full out frenzy, and they could dance, boy could they dance. The music was different, there was a high energy beat with lots of bass thumping under it. I could hear the lyrics to the song and I stared wide-eyed at Toni who had a great big smile on her face, which I was soon matching. It was so loud that I could barely hear her shout over the music.

"It's wild isn't it?"

I nodded, wild wasn't the word, I was watching the men dance as the chorus played again.

Homosexuality - YES SIR!

Do you want to get next to me?

Homosexuality - YES SIR!

Anything to fill your need

I couldn't take it all in at once, it was raw, hedonistic, sexual. A mass of denim and leather, all moving to the same beat; hips thrusting, sweaty, many bare-chested; I was on sensory overload. It was spectacular; I couldn't take my eyes off them.

The women weren't dancing, not to this song anyway. They lined the walls surrounding the dance floor, some arm in arm, caressing, kissing, occasionally more. The longer we were there, the more I was taking in. There was a certain smell that permeated the air, what was it? I saw men passing small bottles amongst each other and putting them to their nose. I looked to Toni for confirmation.

"Poppers."

I frowned, I had no idea what that was.

Toni put her mouth right to my ear. "Amyl Nitrite, it enhances sexual pleasure."

I looked at her with raised eyebrows, I had a lot to learn it seemed, maybe we could discuss this later, but for now, I just wanted to watch.

Boom Boom Boom

Let's go back to my room

So we can do it all night

And you can make me feel right

The lyrics to the songs were sexually explicit and there was no doubting the meaning behind them. The beat was thoroughly addictive and I easily felt myself moving to it. The longer we were down in the basement the more I took in, the free condoms and lubricant that were available at the side of the bar. The fibre optic lighting that lit up the little window displays set into the black walls, each holding a little duck in a nest. The two men getting hot and heavy and when one put his head to the others crotch, Toni turned me to look in another direction. I think

that was what she was referring to when she made me promise not to walk around with my mouth hanging open. I was a little shocked that they hadn't even gone to find a quiet corner, or the bathroom!

Toni got me up to dance to a song. I really liked the beat of this one and the lyrics.

I was a male stripper in a gogo bar

After that the tempo changed with a couple of slow songs. I loved the George Michael song, *A Different Corner*.

*Turn a different corner
And we never would have met*

I always thought of Toni and me when I heard that line. That day almost two years ago when I decided to get off the bus a stop early. That chance meeting had taken me on a journey of discovery and to the one I love.

Toni moved her hands over my hips, then slid them further down the outside of my legs, she stopped as she encountered my stocking belt and drew back to look at me.

"You're wearing stockings," she husked.

I watched as she swallowed hard. Then her hands continued to move over the same area, before dropping a little lower, it was driving me wild.

"I can't wait any longer, the thought of you in stockings is driving me wild. I have to have you."

My eyes grew wide at the thought of what Toni had just said; she manoeuvred us to a corner to allow us a little more privacy.

"Won't people see us?"

"No, I promise."

I knew I should have stopped her but a part of me didn't want to, that part won out.

Toni deftly turned my skirt so that the zip was at the front. Then she lowered it, her hand snaking inside and stroking the tops of my thighs. I felt my knees instantly go weak at her touch.

"Don't worry," Toni whispered, "I won't let you fall."

She took a firm grip around my waist with her free hand while the other continued to stroke my thighs, building the heat between my legs. Again, I knew we should stop, but I was already too turned on to pull back. I felt Toni begin to stroke me through my cotton panties; my feet naturally spread a little further apart offering her more access. She pushed aside the final barrier

and began to stroke my clitoris, with a more direct touch. I groaned, knowing it wouldn't be long.

"Oh, god, Toni. Don't stop."

"Mmm, you're so wet. You feel so good." Toni husked in my ear and that was all it took to send me over into that blissful place that I craved from the moment she touched me.

Toni held onto me tightly as the tremors from my climax ripped through my body. She caught my mouth in a passionate kiss, to mute my cries of ecstasy. We were both breathing hard and leaning into each other.

"We can continue this at home, you want to get out of here?"

I nodded, not yet able to find my voice. I watched in rapt fascination as Toni licked her fingers clean of my juices. It sent a new wave of arousal through my body. This night was definitely far from over and I intended to have a very big say in what was happening next.

As we broke apart and turned to start making our exit from the bar, there were a few knowing looks in my direction from some of the women nearby. It was much too late to be concerned, I had just had sex in a public place and it was fantastic!

Chapter 31

"Thank goodness the hungry little thing is taking a nap." Isobel said as she added a little salt to her food.

"I can hardly get any time to myself during the day, all he ever seems to do is want to feed."

Isobel and I were upstairs with Jack, eating our dinner while he slept, much to Isobel's relief. Jack was almost two months old and literally sucking the life out of poor Isobel.

I looked over at Jack; he was so peaceful it was hard to believe that just an hour ago he had been screaming the place down. Isobel had been taking a nap and he didn't stop until she fed him, as soon as he latched on, we never heard another peep. It could be really difficult getting him to keep to set feeding times, especially with the temptation to feed him early just to quiet him down.

"I wonder where Toni has gotten too? She will have to put her dinner in the microwave if she is going to be much longer."

I looked at the time, Isobel was right she was running late. She might just have to skip dinner and start work.

"Hmm, she is a little late, I might be on my own in the bar for a while. Speaking of work, how's the job going?"

Isobel had talked Toni into giving her a job, so she could help pay her own way in the flat. Toni had initially said no as it was too soon after the baby was born and Isobel needed her rest.

Isobel had put forward such a strong case that Toni had capitulated while muttering something about not being able to refuse a 'MacLeod' woman anything.

Isobel had said she could do the cleaning of the bar every morning, instead of whoever was on early shift, adding that she would include weekends too.

I thought it was a terrific idea as Jack would be just upstairs with Toni and me or if need be, Isobel could take him downstairs with her.

Jack and Isobel were officially banned from the bar during opening hours; Toni said the cigarette smoke was bad for them. I loved how she cared as much for their well being as I did. I had noticed that the smoky atmosphere in the *Illicit Still* wasn't as thick or dense as in the previous bars I had worked. Toni had installed powerful extractor fans, which had really made a difference, but we still stank at the end of the night. Everything from our clothes to our hair, there was no escaping it. It was especially noticeable if I hadn't been working and Toni came up late and I gave her a hug. She always popped into the shower before bed, to remove the smell, I did too, it had become a little ritual for us and, for that reason, I especially enjoyed the times when we both worked an evening shift together. Our shower together was becoming ever more interesting.

As I thought of my girlfriend, I wondered where she was. She could have stopped off in the bar to talk to Eddie. I hadn't seen her for a few hours, but I was expecting her really soon as she was due to start her evening shift.

The phone rang and Isobel picked it up.

"No, hang on, I'll put Shona on."

"Hi, Eddie."

"Toni was supposed to be taking over from me five minutes ago, it's not like her to be late. Have you heard from her?"

"No, not since she went out at lunchtime."

"Do you know where she was going?"

I thought about Eddie's question and realised Toni hadn't actually said where she was going. After lunch she had grabbed her car keys and with a quick kiss to my lips, said she would see me for dinner. Toni had been in a good mood about something, but I hadn't asked what, thinking she

would tell me in her own good time. Now I was getting concerned, it wasn't like her to be late for anything, especially work.

"I don't know, Eddie, I'll come downstairs."

I hung up the phone and Isobel was looking at me with concern.

"Is everything alright, Shona?"

"I honestly don't know, Izzie. Toni hasn't turned up for work yet."

"Oh, that's unusual."

We shared a look of concern.

"You don't think..."

"I don't know what to think," I snapped, cutting off Isobel's question and startling Jack in the process. He started to scream.

"I'm so sorry, Isobel."

"No, it's fine, Shona, you go downstairs and I'll get Jack settled."

I had cut Isobel off because I didn't want to consider what might have happened to Toni. Another beating? A car accident? Should I start calling the hospital? The police? No, I had to stay calm. Pull myself together and not start thinking the worst. I was sure there would be a perfectly reasonable explanation for her absence - but it just wasn't like her...

I nodded at Isobel. "I'll speak with Eddie and I'll let you know as soon as Toni turns up." I attempted a reassuring smile. But Isobel saw right through it.

"I'm sure everything is fine." She rubbed my arm then pulled me in for a quick hug.

"She is probably stuck in traffic as we speak, cursing and looking for a way to get past everyone."

I laughed a little at that image; it was entirely possible that was exactly what she was doing.

I went downstairs and offered to take over from Eddie, I was due to start work in an hour anyway. He refused.

"No, I'll hang around until Toni gets here."

I expected him to say that but knew he must have been starving, so I persuaded him to go upstairs and get some dinner. When he returned twenty minutes later there was still no sign of

Toni.

We continued to serve customers but our eyes went to the door every time it opened in the hope that Toni would walk through it, but nothing. Every time there was a lull, we would rack our brains trying to remember if Toni had mentioned anything about where she was going that day, but neither of us could recall a thing.

Susie arrived in the bar an hour later, she and Eddie had arranged to go out that evening, but he had called her to cancel and Susie had decided to come to the bar and wait for news of Toni.

It was a busy Thursday night and the constant stream of customers was keeping us busy behind the bar, but as the minutes ticked past into hours I really was having great difficulty keeping a lid on my anxiety. This really wasn't like Toni at all.

Isobel popped down from upstairs for the third time in the last hour, everyone was becoming increasingly more worried, it was 9.30pm, and still no sign of my wayward lover.

"Still nothing?" she asked.

I shook my head; the building knot of fear in my abdomen was really getting hard to control.

"Maybe I should go to the police station?" Susie offered.

Susie and Isobel had already been upstairs making calls to hospitals in the region and the police, but there had been no news of Toni being admitted or arrested, well the latter, while not desirable, was not beyond the realms of possibility. They had also tried to call Keith to see if he knew anything about her plans that day, but he was at work. Cath knew nothing and had offered to come into work, I told Susie we didn't need the extra cover, but would call her back as soon as we had any news.

I answered Susie, "Do you think going into the station would make a difference?"

"Oh hell, I don't know, Shona, I just feel so helpless, I want to do something."

I understood that sentiment perfectly; I felt the exact same way. The question was what? I had no idea what else to do, short of going out and looking for her...I stopped dead in my tracks. I had been turning to face a customer at the end of the bar. It couldn't be that simple could it?

"What's wrong, Shona?"

I looked at the concerned faces of Susie and Isobel, "I need to go somewhere. I'll be back as soon as possible."

I was already making my way to the door when I shouted to Eddie. "I'll be right back, oh and the gentleman at the end of the bar wants serving."

The last thing I saw before I turned and left the pub was the identical puzzled looks on their faces, but I had no time to explain as I rushed out, almost crashing into a patron on the way in.

"Woah, where's the fire, hen?"

I didn't stop to answer. I just ran to the one place I hoped my girlfriend would be.

It was a warm, humid August evening, almost dark and I was running along Portobello High Street in a pencil skirt, a short top and two-inch heels. I stopped and took off my heels, then lifted my skirt above my knees so I could run faster; totally oblivious to the curious looks I received along the way.

Finally I was at my destination, I hoped and prayed and my prayers were answered, there in the Daisy Park, all alone sat Toni Martin. I had no idea what had brought her here and in that moment I was too relieved at seeing her to care. I opened the gate and walked towards her.

"Toni?" I called softly.

She turned and looked at me, a frown turned into a sad smile.

"Hey, Shona."

I took a seat beside her on the bench.

"Everyone is worried about you."

She had such pain in her eyes it hurt me to look at her.

"I'm sorry about that," she husked.

She looked back out over the park taking a deep breath of the cooling night air.

"He's not getting out."

I had no idea what she was talking about. I looked at her for clarification, she was sitting unmoving, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Who, Toni?"

She turned to me. "My brother, Ross."

Oh, God, I remembered now. Toni had told me around a year ago that he was up for parole this year. She had been so hopeful at the time, because he sounded like he was finally getting his act together.

"What happened?"

"He got into a fight in prison, it's being treated as attempted murder. Drugs were involved."

"I'm so sorry Toni." I didn't know what else to say.

She shook her head. "I was really looking forward to getting my brother back, to you meeting him, and maybe even having him work with us at the bar." She stopped herself from continuing, returning to reality.

"I should have known better than to build my hopes up where Ross is concerned. He always lets us down."

I watched as she visibly pulled herself together. She stood up from the bench and offered me her hand.

"Come on, I want to get home to my friends and family."

Toni said so much in that one statement. Myself, Isobel and Jack were her family and she was effectively dismissing any possibility of her brother being included. Her feelings were raw and I hoped that in time, the situation would change.

We returned to the bar at closing time. The relief on the faces of our friends was plain to see. Susie immediately popped upstairs to let Isobel know and to make a quick call to Cath.

I took Toni upstairs where Eddie joined us as soon as the last customer left the bar. Once there, Toni initially apologised to everyone, for having caused us to worry about her. It was easy for them to forgive her when hearing about her day. She had received some terrible personal news.

We all sat around drinking tea and coffee and chatting for a little while and I popped my stocking clad feet onto the coffee table. They were pounding hot and painful.

"Oh, Shona. Look at your feet!" Isobel exclaimed.

Everyone did along with me and immediately noticed that the soles were bloodied. In my haste to get to the Daisy Park and my relief at finding Toni, I hadn't noticed the mess of them. Isobel was already fetching a basin of hot water and a bottle of *Dettol*. As soon as the fluid hit the water the smell was all over the sitting room and that seemed to be the cue for everyone to leave.

Eddie and Susie said their goodnights and Toni accompanied them downstairs to lock up after they left. Isobel left the room to check on Jack.

I removed my stockings, popped my aching feet into the basin of water, and immediately wished I had a rag to bite down on. The *Dettol* was getting into all the little cuts and stinging profusely. I squeezed my eyes shut and reminded myself that it was doing me good by helping stop any infection.

Toni returned a minute later and gave me a sympathetic look.

"I'll take you to the nurse first thing tomorrow morning and get your feet looked at properly."

She kneeled down beside my chair taking my hand in hers.

"I'm sorry for causing you so much pain."

"I know. And I'm sorry that you are in pain."

She laid a soft palm on my cheek. "Thanks for caring."

Toni fetched a clean towel to dry my feet, then lifted me in her arms and carried me to the bedroom.

We held each other close that night. My feet would heal in a few days, but I wondered how long it would take Toni to get over her disappointment. One thing was for sure, she wouldn't labour over it, she was extremely resilient in that respect, but even if it didn't show outwardly, it didn't mean she wouldn't be hurting inside. I knew differently.

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~ Licit Cusp ~
by weebod

DISCLAIMERS: See [Part 1](#).

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FEEDBACK: If you enjoy the story please let me know: weebod@mac.com

Part Seven:

Chapter 32

With the bar beginning to run smoothly, Toni suggested that we go to North Uist with the new baby. She had made a promise to my mother that we would return in the summer, which was now all but over, and she intended to keep her promise. It was almost September and the move into autumn was being reflected in the change in the weather, the leaves on the trees were still green, but the wind was rustling them with more frequency, it wouldn't be long until they were falling.

Jack was now a little over two months old and growing like a weed. It would be wonderful to go home and see my family; my mother and gran would be thrilled to see Jack for the first time. Isobel was very keen on the idea, she really missed home, just as I had when I first came to the city, but she had been able to settle a little better than I had, since I was already here and Toni was around for her too. But Edinburgh was not North Uist. The island would always be home to me, even if I never actually lived there ever again.

Since the weekend was always the busiest time in the bar, Toni decided we should leave on the last Monday of August and return on the Thursday, the first day of September. With the arrangements made, all that was left for us to do was pack. We would be staying again at the guesthouse in Lochmaddy. I knew my father would find out soon enough where we were and that we were returning with the baby, and there would be talk no doubt, but we wanted to see our mother and she wanted to see her new grandson and us. My father would just have to get over the perceived shame brought on him by his two eldest daughters, Isobel and myself were living with our life choices to the best of our ability and we were happy. They were after all, ours to make, we had our freedom and the price we had paid was not the loss of our father's love, it was the loss of his presence in our lives. Isobel had been right, all those months ago, when she said he didn't love us. He had never shown us any love and had dismissed us from his life so callously that we were left in no doubt that we would never be able to be a part of it again unless we repented and changed our ways. Even then, I doubt we would be forgiven for our alleged sins.

The four of us left early Monday morning for the long trip that would see us arrive in North Uist in the late evening. Eddie was left in charge of the bar and Toni had no qualms about that

whatsoever, she trusted him implicitly and knew she would return on Thursday with no problems to sort out. Eddie knew how to run a bar as well as she did and that made all the difference. I wondered if he would some day want one of his own, just like Toni, but for now he seemed happy to be working for her, it was early days yet.

Toni had purchased a baby seat for Jack. She had checked up on the best one and found out that Jack should be facing the rear of the car, so he got to sit up front with Toni in his own special seat. Toni drove so cautiously with her precious cargo on board; it was nice to know something could get her to calm her urge to drive very fast.

We made good time to Skye, catching the late afternoon ferry crossing to North Uist. It was a relatively calm crossing, sea wise, but Jack had bawled his little lungs out all the way across. I had hoped it wasn't a sign of things to come. We eventually got settled in the guesthouse in Lochmaddy, where Isobel fed Jack, which instantly quietened him down. His feed was a little late due to Isobel's reluctance to feed him on the ferry. I can't say that I blamed her; there were certain things the islanders would vociferously object to. A screaming baby wouldn't be one of them, but the sight of a baby suckling at his mother's breast most certainly would be cause for strongly voiced objections.

The following morning we were all up early and had eaten breakfast before the first of our visitors arrived, the loud roar of a motorcycle engine easily identifying my Gran even before we saw her.

"That will be May."

Toni walked over to look out of the window.

"She has a teenage boy with her."

I immediately joined her at the window and saw Rory MacAulay walking behind the purposeful strides of my Gran. I wondered what on earth my Gran was thinking of, bringing him here.

"Poor guy looks scared to death."

Toni was right, Rory did look frightened, but then he was probably about to see his son for the first time, at least I assumed that was his reason for being here.

We stepped out of the room to meet my Gran; she was making her way up the stairs alone.

"Where is Isobel?"

That was typical of my Gran, no formalities, just straight to the point.

"I think she is feeding Jack, I'll just go check on her."

I was about to politely knock on the door to Isobel's room when my Gran brushed past me and opened it.

"No point in hiding, it's the most natural thing in the world. I don't understand why women need to hide themselves away while feeding a child, while we all quite happily accept the animals doing the exact same thing out in the fields."

I did love her attitude towards breast-feeding; unfortunately she was one of only a handful on the island strong enough to voice them.

Isobel had obviously just finishing feeding the baby and my Gran immediately took him from her arms, allowing her to get her first look at her new great grandson, and a startled Isobel to rearrange her clothing.

"Oh, isn't he a handsome little devil?"

She smiled and made a fuss over Jack for a couple of minutes before turning her focus back to my sister.

"Young Rory is downstairs, Isobel. Now don't panic. He wants to see you and the baby, if you are agreeable."

"Gran. You didn't make him come here did you?" Isobel asked suspiciously. Mind you, I wouldn't have put it past my Gran.

"Of course not! I simply had a word with the boy when I heard you were coming for a visit." Her indignation gave way to warmth and kindness. "Just spend a little time with him, that's all he is asking."

Isobel nodded, "Alright."

"Good, now go downstairs to the lounge, he is waiting for you both there."

Isobel took Jack from my Gran and left the room. My Gran now took the time to turn her attention to Toni and me.

"How are you doing, May?"

"Oh, same as always, not much changes around here. Well except the arrival of my new great grandson."

"You don't look nearly old enough to be a great granny, May."

Toni could turn on the charm like a water tap, I was certain she was making sure she got her

promised shot on the motorbike.

My Gran beamed with joy at the compliment

"Why thank you, Toni. The men on this island could learn a lot from you."

"You're welcome, May, but I only speak the truth."

"The girls are looking well," My Gran looked closely at Toni's face. "You look like you've been in the wars a bit yourself though?"

"Just a little misunderstanding, May."

I frowned at Toni's reply, a little misunderstanding? That was an understatement; I had still been enduring the occasional nightmare about the events of that horrible evening. My Gran was now scrutinising me closely.

"I don't think my granddaughter agrees with your assessment, Toni."

She hadn't missed the looks that passed between Toni and me as memories of that night resurfaced. Our body language spoke volumes.

"It's all in the past now, May. Someone didn't take kindly to the idea of me opening a bar close to theirs."

My Gran nodded then glanced back to me. "A bit frightening for you?"

"Yes, and it's not something I care to experience again any time soon."

"So you realise it's a possibility then?"

I nodded, "I've come to terms with the fact that Toni's line of business comes with certain risks. While I don't like it, I understand that to move forward it's something we have to learn to live with."

My Gran smiled at me, "You've grown a lot since you left two years ago, Shona," she gestured towards Toni, "And this one has played a big part in that. I'm seeing a change in both of you, it's a good thing, more of a balance."

I understood what my Gran was saying. Though frightening at the time and certainly not something I would ever want to have to go through again, that night back in June had laid a new foundation on which Toni and I had rebuilt our relationship. We had moved forward on a more even keel, with me more able and ready to accept what being with Toni was about, and Toni ready to be more open with me instead of constantly protecting and sheltering me from certain realities. I had felt the difference and now my Gran had seen something too. It had given me real hope for our future together.

We both smiled fondly at my Gran, then we shared a look of understanding, gazing lovingly at each other.

"I'm going to see how Isobel and Rory are getting along."

My Gran made her excuses, deliberately leaving Toni and me alone. I immediately stepped into her welcoming arms.

"She's a wise, intuitive woman, your Gran."

I nodded, "She is constantly surprising me."

"I'll never forget meeting her for the first time, riding up on her motorbike full of spit and vinegar."

We laughed at the memory; my Gran certainly knew how to make a lasting impression.

A few minutes later, Isobel returned upstairs with Jack, the strangest look on her face.

"Is everything alright, Izzie?"

She smiled, "I think so." Settling Jack back onto the bed, she let him kick his little arms and legs out till his heart was content.

"Rory has accepted a place to study teacher training at Moray House College in Edinburgh."

Now that was interesting news, it meant that Rory would be near to Isobel and Jack and I wondered what that meant for all of them.

"Are you happy with that?"

Isobel nodded, "Yes, I think I am. He could have studied in Glasgow or Aberdeen, but decided on Edinburgh, specifically because Jack and I are there. He wants to be a part of Jack's life and I would really like that too. I think it's important that Jack builds a relationship with Rory."

"That's wonderful, Isobel."

She smiled fully, "I think so too."

That afternoon we went to the croft to visit with my mother, Moira and Dougall. My father, as expected, was out working. It was a truly happy reunion. My mother was completely overwhelmed at the sight of her new grandson; there were a lot of tears. She held him for over an

hour, lavishing him with all the love a doting grandmother had to give. Moira held Jack for a few minutes, but my little brother, Dougall was more content to observe his new nephew from a slight distance. Well he was only twelve years old, not quite ready for babies.

We left that afternoon with plans to return the following morning. Isobel had made arrangements to see Rory that evening at the guesthouse, so Toni and I had the rest of the afternoon and evening free. There were a couple of places I wanted to take her and a memory or two I wanted to take back with me to Edinburgh.

We dropped Isobel at the guesthouse, Jack needed a nap and I think Isobel did too. We had all eaten a hearty lunch at the croft, so wouldn't be hungry till later in the evening. The timing would be perfect for what I had in mind and with the good weather holding up, I didn't want to chance waiting until tomorrow when it could be a lot cooler.

"Did you pack your swimming costume?"

Toni nodded while frowning, "Yes, but I'm not much of a swimmer. It's definitely more a leisure pursuit for me, not like your fitness swimming."

"I know, and I promise there won't be much swimming involved."

She looked sceptical, but fetched her costume and towel, and then we headed to a place that was one of the island's best-kept secrets.

"I'm not sure about this, Shona."

Toni was standing, looking at the rowing boat I was coaxing her into.

"Don't worry, I've used the boat lots of times, I'm a strong rower, I promise."

"Isn't the water too cold?"

I rolled my eyes. Honestly, I was beginning to wonder if this was a good idea after all.

"The water will be cold, but you quickly get used to it. We won't be in it for long."

I attempted to reassure Toni and she finally nodded, wading through the water to join me in the boat. I watched as the cold water hit her feet. She didn't look too happy, but put her long legs to good use, making long quick strides, then she gingerly got into the boat. I believed Toni was actually nervous.

Finally, I let out a giggle; this was becoming funny. I had never known Toni to genuinely fear anything, but water obviously got to her.

"What's so funny?" she fumed.

"I didn't know you had a fear of water."

"I don't."

I raised my eyebrows in question.

"Okay, but it's not a fear, it's more of a concern. I'm just not as comfortable in the water as you so obviously are."

"Toni, can you swim?" I was beginning to think she couldn't.

"Yes, but I'm not great."

"What exactly does that mean?"

"It means," she said at length. "I can swim, but I'm not a strong swimmer."

"Can you swim a hundred yards?"

"Of course I can!" she replied indignantly.

"Then you will be fine, so stop worrying."

I started to row us towards the rocky outcrop, all the while keeping a close eye on Toni, she looked...pensive. When I got us to the right spot I removed my sweatshirt and grabbed the rope that was attached to the front of the boat. I jumped into the cold water and swam towards the rocks. There I knew I would find the piece of rock I could moor the small boat to. I tied the rope around it and swam back to Toni.

I stayed in the water and called to her, "Take off your sweatshirt and jump in."

"Have you lost your mind? We are in the middle of the ocean!"

I smiled; this was a side of Toni I had never witnessed before.

"Toni, do you trust me?"

"You know I do."

"Then do you think I would let you drown in the *middle* of the ocean?"

"I suppose not."

I pointed to where the boat was tied to the rock. "Follow the rope to the rock, it's only twenty feet away. When you get there we only have a very short swim, about thirty yards. I promise, I will be with you all the way."

Toni nodded, albeit reluctantly. She removed her sweatshirt and not so much jumped as slid into the cold water.

Then she protested loudly.

"Jesus Christ! It's freezing!"

"Come on, keep moving."

She muttered under her breath as we made our way slowly to the rocks. The tide was almost full in and I knew we could make it to our destination now.

I swam into the opening in the rock with Toni right by my side. All around us the rock soared to just a small opening some fifty feet above, but that wasn't of interest to me. I was headed to the small cave recessed into this cavernous opening. It could only be reached at high tide.

Sure enough, we were within two feet of it. I could reach the edge and pull myself up.

"Come on - pull up on the ledge." Toni did as instructed muttering about the cold as she pulled her long, lean frame out of the water. I quickly got to work.

Inside the cave were several large thick plastic bags, some held kindling, some towels and others, blankets. I searched the bags and found matches, then threw Toni a towel to dry herself off, and a blanket to keep warm until I could get a fire going.

This cave was a rite of passage for the children on the island. Hard to find unless you knew exactly what you were looking for, the teenagers over the years passed down this secret amongst themselves. I'm sure this place was keeping many secrets that were centuries old. I had never had reason to come here for any secret rendezvous, but had visited many times simply for the solitude. I had also shown Isobel the cave, a year after it had been shown to me by Mhairi MacIntosh, or as Isobel used to call her Mahairy. I'm surprised Mhairi tolerated the little scamp, but she just laughed or sometimes tickled Isobel till she screamed her apology. Mhairi was two years older than me and we had been good friends until she left school and headed off to Inverness for a job in an insurance company. I hadn't seen or heard from her since.

I quickly got a small fire going and it lit up the cave in the process. I watched as Toni's eyes darted all around, taking in our ancient surroundings. This place was like a treasure trove. Many older items of interest that kids had found often made their way here, along with some junk. Ancient pieces of driftwood mixed with old bottles that had washed up on the shore. There were old coins which I'm sure would be of interest to a museum, but these were ours, the islanders had created their very own collection. I'm sure it had been found and raided many times, but new items kept appearing.

"This is amazing." Toni remarked, her voice full of wonder.

I smiled; I always loved seeing the reaction of another person laying eyes on this place for the first time.

"Isn't it?"

Toni nodded, as she continued to look around. "I bet a lot has happened in this small space over the years."

She looked at me for confirmation.

I cleared my throat, "I wouldn't know personally, but I agree, many things have happened in this cave."

The air around us suddenly grew thick and I know the heat that infused my body wasn't all coming from the small fire I had going. I should have known Toni would catch on really quick. If I didn't act swiftly, I was going to lose control of this situation.

The art of seduction was something I wasn't well practised in. I always knew that Toni would guide and assist me, helping us to get to where we wanted to go, but in my fantasy, my reason for bringing her here, I would be making all the moves, guiding us; leading.

I looked at Toni who sat, absolutely still, waiting on me. I was going to get my fantasy. I pulled two blankets from a heavy plastic bag and laid them on the ground, I then took Toni's hand and invited her to join me. I spent the next hour exploring every inch of her beautiful body, revelling in the taste and textures. The way her body would shiver when I got to a particularly sensitive area and especially the sounds she made. I loved that Toni was so vocal; she always let me know what she was feeling. And I always knew when she was ready to orgasm, as she would utter the words '*It's so good.*' I heard them many times that late afternoon. When we were both sated and hunger was pulling at us, forcing us to leave our '*cave of cavernous delights*' as Toni had dubbed it, she threw her swimming costume amongst the gathered artefacts and encouraged me to do the same. I giggled at the image of who would next see the two costumes and what thoughts might race through their head. We then dropped back down into the water, naked, and made our way back to the rowing boat, where we had towels and sweatshirts. I would never forget that afternoon, there was something extra special about it, and I had to admit, considering the island's religious beliefs, there was something decadent and subversive about our actions, which only served to enhance my overall experience.

The following morning Toni got her motorbike wish. She had driven Isobel, Jack and me to the

croft and my Gran was there, waiting. We all stood outside and watched as she handed Toni the spare motorcycle helmet and instructed her to get into the sidecar - the look on her face was priceless, which made all of us laugh. Toni protested, saying her legs would never fit. My Gran's reply was simply. *'Do you want to have fun or not?'* To that question Toni quickly crammed her long, slender frame into the sidecar, then hastily popped the crash helmet on to her head.

We laughed again as my Gran gunned the engine, revving it up for effect, then took off very suddenly causing Toni's head to jerk back. They were quickly on the road and picking up speed. I knew that Toni wouldn't soon forget this trip.

She later told me that they had stopped off somewhere and May had let her ride the bike solo, but it didn't compare to the thrill of my Gran riding flat out on the single lane roads that took them round the island. Only an intimate knowledge of the area, and any other vehicle on the road letting you pass, allowed for that. Toni stated that the cramped muscles in her legs and pain in her back had been worth every second of their high-speed adventure.

The way her face became so animated and her eyes lit up with the retelling of the morning with my Gran I was left in no doubt as to how much fun the pair of them had enjoyed. I knew then that Toni would be taking to these roads in the future at every opportunity. They appealed to the daredevil in her and it helped that there were no police cars around to check your speed. I would be sitting my driving test shortly after we returned, but I doubted I would ever be like my Gran and Toni. Their need for speed and danger was a little disconcerting. The two of them together, egging each other on, I dreaded to think of the risk-taking maniacs they became.

Thursday morning arrived all too soon. We had made a quick trip over to the croft to say goodbye to the family and Rory and my Gran turned up at the ferry to wave the four of us off. We would be back soon enough to the island, with Christmas being mentioned. We were surprised to see my grandfather turn up in his Land Rover. I wasn't sure how he felt about all the goings on and changes that had occurred in the lives of Isobel and myself; he never said a word about it. I had just assumed that, if he wanted to see his great grandson, he would have turned up before to do so. I looked to Isobel who was equally as surprised as I was at his arrival. He went straight to Jack and Isobel and motioned for the baby. Izzie smiled as she handed over her precious bundle to him.

My grandfather looked closely at Jack before remarking, "He looks like a MacAulay."

I couldn't disagree, he had the same hair colour as Rory. Where Isobel was auburn, Rory was dark haired.

Everyone knew that my grandfather and Rory's grandfather never got along, some old family feud from years back.

He handed Jack back to Isobel then gave her an envelope.

"It's just a little something for you and the baby. I know Shona and, er, Toni, have been helping

you out, but this means you and the wee one can get yourself some extras. Maybe this will encourage that auld codger Hugh MacAulay to dip his hands into his pockets..."

"Charles Ferguson! Don't you dare make this personal!" my grandmother chastised.

He cleared his throat, " I'm just saying, May. Anyway, you treat yourself and the wee one."

He gave Isobel a quick hug, then turned to me.

"Make me proud."

That's all he said before hugging me. He then shook Toni's hand and thanked her for looking after his girls.

"It's about time, ya daft old goat."

That was from my Gran; she could be merciless when she wanted to. I knew it wasn't easy for my grandfather, but he loved us and had obviously decided to show us he did, despite all that had happened in the last year.

We didn't know until we returned to Edinburgh that my grandfather had given Isobel a cheque for £500. It was an extremely generous gesture. He wasn't a poor man, but not wealthy either. Isobel had burst into tears when she opened the envelope that night. An amount like that would make a world of difference to her and Jack.

Back in Edinburgh things quickly returned to normal. The bar was exactly as Toni had left it. Despite her absolute trust in Eddie, I still knew she had been reluctant to leave it. Isobel started back at her cleaning job, and I readied myself for the new academic year. I was half way there and the time had flown by. I couldn't believe so much had happened in the last two years. I could never in my wildest dreams have imagined the twists and turns my life would take, from an accidental meeting with Toni, to Isobel turning up, literally at my door, pregnant. The most important thing was, we were all happy. Isobel was a contented mother to a lovely, healthy baby boy. Toni had her bar, a dream she had held dear for a very long time and I was surrounded by people I loved and doing what I loved best, studying history. I felt we were all in a settled place and I hoped that feeling would continue for at least the next two years.

I was very much looking forward to the future, however it was the immediate future that held my attention at the moment. I had my driving test the following morning and I would freely admit, I was very nervous. Toni had been telling me all day not to worry, I would be fine, and failing wasn't necessarily a bad thing, less than half passed first time. I was taking little comfort in that, I didn't want to fail, and I had been taking lessons as planned with the local driving school. My instructor was a nice older gentleman, who was very patient and encouraging. He told me I was

ready, but on my lesson the morning of the test, I was driving like I had never been in his car before. He simply said it wasn't unusual and it was good to get all the mistakes out of the way before my test. Towards the end of the lesson, we drove to the test centre and I awaited the test examiner with sweaty palms and my damp shirt clinging to my back. I wasn't confident and decided if I didn't crash the car or knock down a pedestrian it would be a good day.

I walked into the bar almost two hours later. Toni looked at me expectantly.

"Well? How did you get on?"

"I passed." I said this quietly, almost a whisper, as I could scarcely believe it myself.

"Oh well, never mi...wait, what did you say?"

I smiled and repeated the sentence, louder this time. "I passed."

Toni whooped and ran around to the other side of the bar to give me a hug, she lifted me off the ground and whirled me around.

"I knew you could do it!"

I left her to serve the afternoon customers and went upstairs to share my good news with Isobel who was equally excited. I really was on cloud nine.

It was later that night when I climbed into bed with Toni that I remembered what she said about telling me how many times she sat her test before passing. I knew it would be once, but I thought I would ask anyway.

"Toni?"

"Yessss?" came the slightly muffled reply from her side of the bed. She turned to face me.

"I passed my test today."

"Uhuh."

"You said when I passed, you would tell me how many times it took you to pass."

She was quiet for a few moments then said quickly, "Three," before turning away from me.

I lay there shocked. Toni Martin, the speed freak, who loved to drive, took three goes at passing her driving test? I must have heard her wrong; I decided to investigate further.

"Did you say *three*?"

There was no reply from the lump next to me.

"Toni?"

I heard her sigh. "Yes, I took three attempts at passing my test."

"How?" That was all I could think to ask.

She turned to face me again, "Okay, first time I failed for speeding, the second time I failed for not using my mirrors often enough. Basically I was cocky and over confident, that's why I was failed...twice. The third time I drove like an old woman and passed!"

I started to laugh.

"It's not funny."

"Yeah, it is."

"You think so?"

I nodded, "I do."

That's when she attacked me and tickled me till I almost wet myself and had to beg her to stop. Still, it was worth the teasing. I wondered if Eddie knew...

Chapter 33

September 2006

I heard her key turn in the lock and I opened my eyes and glanced at the clock, 4.30am. Toni had been at the opening of her new club, so I expected her home late. I had been at a fundraiser to raise funds to allow excavation work to be carried out in the heart of Edinburgh's Old Town. I did offer to go to the nightclub when the fundraiser was finished, but Toni said, not to worry and keep the bed warm for her.

I listened as she headed straight for the kitchen, hearing the fridge door open and close. I knew she would have a cup of tea and relax for a few minutes before coming into the bedroom. It was a way of unwinding that I had witnessed Toni indulge in after a night behind the bar since that first night, all those years ago, that I had spent at her flat. A pot of tea and a biscuit or two; she still did it. The difference now was that Toni rarely, if ever, worked behind the bar and, when she did, she did it more for fun than necessity. After opening the *Illicit Still* she had never looked back. Richard Armstrong, the man who had given her the loan to open her first bar, saw her

potential early on and became a silent partner in all her later ventures. To date she owned five bars and tonight had been the opening of her second nightclub.

We had moved out of the flat above the *Illicit Still* almost ten years ago. We now lived in a Georgian town house in Edinburgh's exclusive New Town. I know these buildings changed hands for millions, but I tried not to think about that side of our life. Toni had said it would be a nice place to live and it did make sense for both of us to be based in the city centre. I could walk to work at the university and Toni could walk around town when she wanted since, due to traffic congestion, driving around the city centre nowadays was a nightmare.

Fortunately, when it came to the interior of our home, Toni was happy for it to resemble the academic's flat that it partly was. Sharing space with her had always been easy, even when it was at a premium, now we had more rooms than we knew what to do with. I stared up at the ceiling, which was almost twenty feet above me, with its ornate cornice and ceiling rose, the décor was truly beautiful, without being overly lavish; I liked the combination.

I listened as Toni cleaned out her mug in the kitchen sink then made her way towards our bedroom.

"Hey beautiful, how did it go?" I asked.

"Very well, thanks for asking."

I could just make out her silhouette in the dim lighting and watched as she made her way towards me.

"I'm going to grab a quick shower, then I'll join you."

She kissed me on the lips before heading to the en-suite bathroom. Despite a smoking ban being introduced to Scotland earlier this year, she still took a quick shower before joining me, but it was a bonus that her clothing no longer held the stench of cigarette smoke. I especially loved the fact it wasn't in her hair, still dark, but then she was having it dyed professionally at a top hairdressers to keep it natural looking. I remember the day she noticed her first grey hair, I already knew it was there along with some others, but hadn't told her. It wasn't long after that she began getting it 'touched up'. I was greying a little myself, but being blonde it seemed a much more gradual process. Toni said it was a naturally sophisticated, distinguished look. I assumed that was a good thing.

I heard the shower being turned off and then Toni padded naked into the bedroom to join me, she hadn't washed her hair no longer needing to after a night in the smokeless bar. I relished the fresh smell of her skin and immediately sought it out.

"Mmm, I missed you."

I kissed her deeply, tasting the mint toothpaste she had just used. After all these years I still couldn't get enough of her, she excited me as much now as she did twenty years ago.

We made love for over an hour before we both fell into slumber. I awoke to the ringing of the telephone.

"Hello?" I answered in a sleep filled voice as Toni stirred beside me. It was just after seven in the morning.

"Shona, it's Moira."

I wondered what my youngest sister was doing ringing me at this time on a Saturday morning; I was still trying to fully open my left eye as I replied.

"Is everything alright?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Father died last night, from a heart attack."

"Oh..."

"I'm just about to call Isobel and then I will ring Dougall, I should be able to catch him before he heads to bed."

"Is there anything you want me to do, Moira?" My brain was kicking into gear now. My father was dead. How was my mother taking this news?

"How's Mum?"

"She's obviously upset, I mean it was very unexpected. She got up early this morning thinking he was already awake and there he was on the chair, he had never made it to bed."

"I see."

"I'm going to call Isobel and Dougall. I'll call you later when I know more. And don't worry, I will make the funeral arrangements and make sure mum is okay."

"Thanks, Moira. I will be up as soon as possible. I'll let you know when I'm arriving."

"I'll talk to you soon, Shona. Safe journey."

"I'll see you soon and I'll call mum a little later."

We said our goodbyes and I remained sat up in bed, not sure what to think or how to react. The man who had turned me out of his life all those years ago was dead, but he was my father and that had to mean something, right? I should be feeling *something*.

Toni was beginning to fully waken beside me, "Is everything okay, Shona?"

I looked at her wondering before answering simply, "My father is dead."

I remembered the floods of tears I burst into when my grandfather passed away. The same when Keith, Toni's father, passed away, but I had tried to keep them more private as I wanted to be strong for Toni. In the end she had told me not to keep it in, to grieve naturally and just let it out. It had been good advice. Now I watched as Toni scrutinised my face, trying to discern what I was feeling and the answer was plain and simple. I was feeling nothing, and that scared me a little.

The weekend passed by in a haze of phone calls and travel arrangements. Rearranging work schedules and meetings, we were going to drive up first thing Monday morning and catch the afternoon ferry as we had done many, many times before.

I watched as Toni neatly packed the boot of her BMW, saloon. It was a lovely car and one she thoroughly enjoyed driving, an extravagance for sure, but who could deny her it? She had worked very hard for everything she had. I fondly recalled the first car she owned when I met her, the red *Nova*. I had loved that car so much that when Toni decided to get a new car, I wanted the *Nova*. She agreed to keep it as a little run around for Isobel and me, but then voiced her regret when it took her years to get me to part with it. I would still have it today if it had been possible. Unfortunately, the repair bills became too high to justify its upkeep. I glanced over at my green VW Beetle, parked on the wide cobbled street. Toni had shaken her head when I purchased the second-hand vehicle. She warned me the cost of up keeping it would be high, and it was, but I loved it. It looked so out of place on this street lined with top of the range cars, but it was perfectly in keeping with who I am and my love for anything with a past. The car was just another facet of my passion.

We were soon on our way, making the journey that, over the intervening years, had become so familiar to us. I was happy to let Toni do the driving; she enjoyed the pursuit much more than I did. I only used my car when it was absolutely necessary; otherwise, I was more than happy to walk around the centre of town, between the university and home. I never imagined, all those years ago, that I would end up as a lecturer at the very university where I began my studies. A lifetime in academia isn't a surprise though. I love passing on the knowledge that I have gained over the many years of study, and I haven't stopped yet. After years of reading about St Kilda, the birthplace of my father, and several visits to the archipelago, now a world heritage site, new information about its inhabitants is still emerging. By all accounts, my father was lucky to have survived being born on the island at all. Its infant mortality rate was extraordinarily high with 80% of babies dying within seven days of being born. The reason for this remained a mystery until just recently. There had been much speculation over the years about the cause, including hereditary factors, but the killer was tetanus, caused by the tradition of smearing the navel in a mixture of dung and oil extracted from the crops of Fulmars. The very bird that had sustained the island's inhabitants for almost 5,000 years was eventually a major contributing factor to its decline in population, leading to its evacuation.

After finishing my degree in Scottish history, I entered into the field of research, completing a

thesis on the Highland Clearances, a period of Scottish history that has become of enormous interest to me. Taking me to places I could only image visiting all those years ago when I first left North Uist. Places such as Cape Breton, in Canada, where I visited back in 1994. Many Scots emigrated there and the area contains many monuments and monikers indicating this. I followed the trail of Flora MacDonald, taking me to North Carolina where she visited her sister in the winter of 1774 to 1775. Many Scots settled in North Carolina. I have been to Australia many times, but not just for the purpose of research and history, my brother Dougall now lives there, much to my surprise and pleasure. I honestly always imagined him remaining on North Uist.

"Oh, Shona, do we have to listen to this again?"

Toni has pulled me from my reflective mood; we still can't find much common ground when it comes to music. She is driving and can't change the choices I have selected on her iPod. You would think that, since the album is actually on *her* iPod, she wouldn't have any cause for complaint, but I sneak on a few of my choices for when we undertake these longer journeys together. Taking pity on her I select her latest favourite album, Kasabian's *Empire*. If she started driving in time to the music, I was changing to something more sedate.

We made good time, arriving at our croft just after 8.30pm. As soon as Toni was able to afford it, she had purchased this little plot of land. The actual house had been in dire need of a drastic makeover but, slowly and surely, over time, Toni got it into a liveable condition. That was back in 1995, and since then the croft has been brought right up into the 21st century. Initially we had no electricity, using oil lamps for lighting and peat to burn in the hearth for heating. Now we have electricity, central heating, all mod cons, even broadband. The interior of the croft is completely modern, a little sacrilegious perhaps, but sometimes you just have to move with the times. We did have a lot of fun in those early days though; it truly was like going back in time. I was used to the conditions, and Toni quickly acclimatised to them, but when we brought friends up with us, they would be horrified. But even they soon began to enjoy the sparseness of their surroundings. It really did make for some fantastic times; with no television and just the radio for entertainment, we made the most of entertaining ourselves. Eddie and Susie came to really love the island over the years and, to this day, make good use of the croft whenever they can. Usually leaving their kids with Eddie or Susie's parents, so they can have a romantic getaway on their own.

We dropped of our luggage and headed straight off again to see my mum. I couldn't wait to hold her. Moira was at the croft looking after her; she had been there since Saturday morning, when she first heard the news.

"Hi, Moira," I greeted and hugged my youngest sister fiercely as soon as she answered the door.

"Oh, it's so good to see you, Shona," she said, as we continued to hold each other close.

"How are you?" I knew Moira had been co-ordinating everything from here on the island and I hoped, now that I was here, I could help in some way.

"I'm fine, Shona, things are coming together although I can't finalise all the funeral arrangements until Dougall actually gets on his plane."

I understood; we were hoping to make the funeral date Thursday, but it all hinged on Dougall actually getting here on time from Australia. Fortunately, since North Uist had such a small population, we could be flexible with the arrangements.

"How is mum?"

"She's holding up not too badly, she will be glad to see you. It's really just been the two of us since Saturday, she has been looking forward to the rest of you arriving, and keeps asking me when you are all getting here."

"Isobel tomorrow and Dougall sometime on Wednesday?"

"Yes, that's how it's looking."

Moira looked behind me to see Toni standing patiently just outside the door.

"How are you, Toni?"

"I'm good, Moira, sorry to hear about your father."

"Thanks, Toni."

We all knew that Toni had no time for my father, but she did care for us, and her support mattered a great deal.

"Come on in, mum is taking a nap, I'll go waken her."

"It's okay, Moira, I'll go through and see her."

We made our way into the sitting room, Moira went to put the kettle on and I made the short trip down the hall to my mother's bedroom.

I looked inside the dark room; the curtains were drawn, keeping out the last of the daylight. I hadn't set foot in this room in years. I saw my mother stir, she always was a very light sleeper.

"Shona? Is that you?" Her voice was sounding hoarse, from sleep and I'm sure, a lot of crying over the last three days.

"Yes, Mum."

"Oh, Shona, it's so good to see you."

She sat up in bed, her hair in disarray, a very rare sight indeed. She looked older, drawn.

"No need to get up, Mum, you just stay there."

I sat down on the bed beside her and took her hand. "I'm sorry." That was all I could think of to say.

She took me in her arms and held me to her, the sobs racking her slight frame. I pulled her close, rubbing her back soothingly until the tears subsided. I don't know how long that was, a few minutes, an hour? It was hard to tell.

"I know he was a difficult man to love." It came out on a half sob.

"Shhh, now. You loved him, that's all that matters. You never have to make any apologies for that."

"I'm sure you find that hard to understand, especially after the way he treated you all."

Well that was certainly true, but I knew she did love him, had always loved him, and now he was gone.

"That's not important. You are. And you have just lost the man you love. I'm here for you."

"Thank you, Shona."

I sat with her till she fell back asleep, obviously exhausted. I wondered what lay in store for my mother now. She was sixty-one years old and a widow. Her entire adult life had revolved around my father, cooking and cleaning for him and raising us. Right up until his death sometime in the early hours of Saturday morning, my father was still out working every day of the week, but never a Sunday, all his life he kept the Sabbath holy. We were grown up and he was gone, my mother no longer had a role as a wife, I wondered how she would cope living life for herself. It would be very different and completely new to her.

The following day Isobel and her family arrived at Toni and my place. They were booked into the guesthouse. Usually if they visited when we weren't here, they would stay in the croft.

"Hi Prof, is that breakfast I smell?"

I was in the kitchen cooking breakfast when they arrived; Isobel was always claiming she was hungry. She had taken to calling me 'The Professor' or 'Prof' a name Eddie had eventually settled

on, when I got my second degree. He said that's where I was headed.

"Haven't you eaten yet?"

"We just got off the ferry," she protested.

I started to add more sausages and bacon to the grill, while Isobel went to the fridge to get eggs. I had prepared for this eventuality.

"How's mum?"

"I went to see her last night. She's very upset as you can imagine, she looks tired, Isobel."

"Well, she did just lose her husband."

I noticed that Isobel was distancing herself from my father. From the reality that not only had my mother lost her husband, but we had lost our father. I didn't blame her I was having a hard time marrying the two together myself. We all wanted to be here for my mother, she had lost her husband, but it didn't feel like we had suffered the loss of a parent, but we had.

"She really loved him you know?"

"I can't imagine why, but I know that she did. He was a very fortunate man in that respect."

I couldn't disagree with that sentiment; he had been a very fortunate man to have a woman like my mother by his side all those years.

Jack, along with a very hungry looking Toni soon joined us in the kitchen. The pair of them started picking at the food, stealing sausages from the oven where they were warming.

"Hi, Auntie Shona."

He dropped a kiss on my cheek. It was difficult to get used to Jack becoming a man. His voice was deep and he had a five o'clock shadow, a look he favoured over being clean-shaven. Jack had turned nineteen earlier this year, he was a strapping 6 foot and about to start his second year at medical school. I knew this was a choice that made my sister immensely proud and happy. Only once did she ever discuss with me what her plans would have been had she not fallen pregnant with Jack. She had made her mind up to try for a place to study medicine. Her grades were good enough, but we will never know if she would have been accepted. Ever the pragmatist, Isobel never dwelled on it or even discussed it again. It didn't happen that way and she accepted it and moved on. She started a nursing course when Jack was two years old. It had been a practical choice back then when she was a young mother, as nursing was one of the few careers that offered a training wage, that meant she could study and not have to get a job at the same time. She managed to juggle her studies with bringing up her son. It wasn't easy, but she achieved it.

Isobel and Jack had stayed in the flat above the *Illicit Still* with Toni and me right up until she married Rory, back here on North Uist. After that the three of them got a flat together in Edinburgh, where Rory had gotten his first job and Isobel was still training to be a nurse. Since then, they had moved a couple of times, with Rory currently an assistant headmaster at a school in Aberdeen. There have also been two more additions to the clan MacAulay, with firstly, Rory junior coming along, followed by little Isla three years later. She is almost nine now and the spitting image of her mother, with that full head of auburn hair and hazel eyes.

Soon the table was set and we were all sitting enjoying a full breakfast, Rory was looking well. I still remember him getting his first teaching post and practically having to beg Isobel to marry him, she was a tough sell, but they have never looked back after that difficult start.

I was closest to Jack out of all my nieces and nephews. I had been around him since his inception and he currently attended the university I worked at.

"You looking forward to your second year?"

I'm not sure how he felt about occasionally bumping into his boring historian auntie, but he really didn't seem to mind. It was a very big campus and he had no qualms dropping in on Toni and me for dinner once or twice a week. When he asked Toni for a job, she didn't hesitate to employ him, it's not like she wasn't looking for staff. The turnover in bar work was very high and jobs easy to come by.

"Yeah, I am, I'm going to opt for the additional year. So I will be choosing a speciality area of study for next year."

"Good for you, Jack. It takes longer, but then I'm the last person to say anything about additional degrees and study."

We shared a laugh at that, in a lot of ways I had never stopped, but I officially spent eight years studying before taking my first paying job in my chosen field. I have continued to study throughout my working life; I have a Masters degree and a PhD. I just love to learn.

Shona helped me clear up all the breakfast dishes. We waved off all the other offers of help; sometimes it was more productive that way.

"I'm heading off to see mum now, but we will see you for dinner?"

"Sure, everyone is invited here for dinner, I'm not having mum cooking for all of us, but if she insists on trying let me know and I will just take the food over to hers and we can all get stuck into the cooking in her kitchen."

"Well you never know, the routine might be good for her. And if she struggles to cope we can soon pick up the pieces."

"True." Isobel was right; it might be good for my mum to continue with her routine if that was

what she wanted to do.

The day of the funeral was soon upon us. Dougall and his family had arrived late Wednesday afternoon, allowing everything to go ahead as initially planned. Toni and I dressed in our black clothing, packed specifically for today, and then she drove us the few miles to the small church where the service was being held.

I looked around the church at all the people who had gathered to mourn my father's passing. Everyone dressed respectfully in black. We had all gathered at the church that my father had dutifully attended every Sunday since he came to the island all those years ago with his mother and father. I don't think he ever missed a Sunday service in all those years. Seventy-nine years old he was. I had no idea of his age, it's strange the things you find out after someone's death. The things you find. My father's father had committed suicide and it was my thirteen-year-old father, just a boy, who had found him; hanging inside the storage shed where they kept their tools.

Sorting through my father's things we found letters, lots of them, including three from Mhairi MacIntosh, my school friend who had left the island to go work in Inverness. The third letter had said that if she didn't hear from me, she would assume I didn't want to stay in touch. How could someone do that? Keep letters that were sent to their children and never pass them on? I assume it was because Mhairi had left the island and my father didn't want me to get any ideas.

I looked at the coffin that held the lifeless body of my father, emblazoned with the flowers that we had ordered. A display that said 'Dad' made out of white roses. Another that said 'Granddad' this one made up of assorted carnations. They seemed fake, hollow sentiments. Yes, he was our father and he was a granddad to his grandchildren, but in name only. One by one, he disowned all of us. I was first, followed by Isobel, then Dougall. My brother had been the biggest surprise of all, when after marrying Emily Morrison, his childhood sweetheart; they promptly emigrated to Perth, Australia. I guess Dougall had a plan all along to get off the island. It was one way to avoid the trap that had been laid for him by my father. I looked at my brother standing to my right, his wife and two children by his side. The kids, Christopher and Margaret, were the picture of health, with nicely tanned skin. I loved the way they called me Auntie Shona, with their Australian accents. Dougall and Emily returned with the children occasionally, but it was a long and expensive trip to take with any regularity. Perhaps now my mother could actually visit them if she chose to. My father would have never allowed it while he was alive; he never forgave Dougall for leaving.

After Dougall left, the only child of his that he accepted in his life was Moira, and her divorce ended that. He told her she should have stuck with her marriage regardless of the problems they had. It didn't matter to him that Moira's husband mistreated her. I glanced to my left where Moira stood at my mother's side. She had initially left North Uist to study fine art at The Glasgow

School of Art. After completing her four-year course, she continued to live and work in Glasgow where she met her husband, a sculptor. Unfortunately it didn't work out, largely contributed to by Sandy's drinking habit. After her divorce, Moira returned to live on North Uist, where she set up a studio and made a living selling oil paintings of the surrounding areas. She seems content with her single life back on the island. I think the sedate pace of life on North Uist always appealed to the dreamer in Moira and the surroundings certainly feed her creative imagination and talent. I have several of her paintings hanging at home in Edinburgh. I love her work; it's so vibrant.

With the mass finished, we funnelled out of the church behind my father's coffin, taking the short walk to the adjacent graveyard, which would be his final resting-place. I felt oddly detached from the proceedings; a feeling that hadn't left me since Moira called on Saturday morning informing me of his passing. I kept reminding myself that we were burying my father; he was gone. Still I felt little beyond the reassuring squeeze of Toni's hand as she held mine. If there were any disapproving looks cast our way neither of us noticed or cared. After all these years, their small mindedness no longer mattered. We have been frequent visitors to this island over the intervening years. Buying a croft, integrating into the community and generally being accepted, but there are some who will never accept my lifestyle, as there were some who have never let up on poor Isobel for getting pregnant out of wedlock. She endured a lot on her first few visits back to the island, the name-calling, and the looks of disgust sent her way.

After the funeral, there was tea and sandwiches provided in the church hall. We all stood around for an hour or so chatting and accepting the condolences of the mourners. I was listening to Mr. Fergus tell me what a sad loss my father's passing was.

"He was a fine, God fearing man. Never missed a day's work, nor a Sunday service. We will not see his like again."

What did I say to that? All I could do was nod along. I just wanted to get out of this place; I had all but had my fill of the Mr. Fergus' and the Mrs. McKean's of this island. They all knew my father spoke to not one of his children at the time of his passing, hadn't done so for years. He shunned his grandchildren, wanted no part in their lives either. A fine God fearing man indeed. If all it took to pass into the kingdom of heaven was attending work every day and church every Sunday then we were truly in a sorry mess. What of forgiveness? Kindness? Acceptance? Did none of that matter? I felt sick to my stomach, it was suffocating in this hall, and I had to get out of there.

Toni was hovering by my side and she read my mood easily. She took my hand and, with a smile towards Mr. Fergus, she led me away.

"Let's get you out of here," she whispered to me.

I was so happy to hear those words I thought I might cry with relief.

After saying our goodbyes, we were soon making the short journey back to our croft. As soon as we were through the door, I removed my jacket and took a seat on the sofa, kicking off my shoes and resting my head back against the soft material.

"I'll put the kettle on."

I could barely sum up the energy to reply. I rubbed my temples, trying to displace the throbbing headache that had set in.

Toni returned a few minutes later with two cups of tea, I didn't touch mine and we sat in silence for a while.

"Why couldn't he love us?"

I burst into tears; I had no control over them. Toni held me, offering comfort.

"Why didn't he want us? He drove us all away!" Still the tears continued.

"Are we all so bad, that we deserved to be treated like unwanted clothing, that he could just discard when it no longer fitted the way he expected?"

Toni continued to hold me, rubbing my back.

"Come on, let it all out," she encouraged.

"I don't understand, Toni. I just don't understand."

"And I wish I had the answers for you, but I don't. I don't understand it either, Shona, it seems incomprehensible to me that he turned his back on four great kids. Anyone else would have been proud of you all."

Toni was right; there were no answers for me, and any chance I ever had of gaining any died with him on Saturday morning. My father took a lot of secrets to the grave. There was no deathbed confession, I always wondered and I suppose secretly hoped that in his older years he might mellow and decide he wanted to reconcile with all of us. Make peace, but there was to be none of that and, if he ever had harboured any thoughts about it, he certainly left it too late. He remained bitter till the very end. My father never loved me. He never showed me any affection, even as a child. He was a cold-hearted remote individual who remained estranged from his children right up until his death. Those were the facts and I had to deal with them. There would be no fairy tale ending, but I would always wonder why. I don't even really know who my father was, he was a presence in my life till I was eighteen years old, but I really never knew the man. Or maybe I did, and that's all there had been to him? Who knows?

I decided to have all the family over on Saturday evening. We were very rarely all in the one place at the same time and I wanted to make the most of it. I also hoped it would be good for my mother, being surrounded by everyone that she loved.

Isobel and my mother arrived early to help me with the food preparations, I appreciated the extra assistance and, of course, being occupied was a good thing for my mother. We chatted as we readied the food, and waited for the rest of the family to arrive. Toni had gone to collect my Gran, as she was not allowed to drive at the moment having had a knee replacement, just three weeks ago.

I heard them bickering as they came through the front door of the croft.

"For goodness sake, Toni, I'm fine!"

"You have just had a knee replacement, woman!"

I walked out to meet them, only to be greeted by the sight of my Gran brandishing her walking stick at Toni, who deftly avoided a rap across the shins. The new knee was keeping my Gran out of her beloved motorcycle, not the same one as she had when Toni first met her, but the exact same model and paint job, a Russian *Ural* with the sidecar. Old age was catching up on my Gran and she was no longer able to whiz around the island on her bike at the speeds she used to enjoy. She had tried talking Toni into putting her into the sidecar and whizzing her around the island, so she could still enjoy the thrill of it. Toni had refused to do it on this trip fearing my Gran would do damage to her knee trying to manoeuvre herself in and out of the sidecar; my Gran still hadn't forgiven her.

I fondly recalled our visit earlier this summer when Toni took her for a spin. I had looked on aghast as I saw the pair of them speeding back towards my Gran's house and I decided to have a serious word with Toni about the speed. My Gran was approaching her ninetieth year!

"What?" she protested at the look I gave her when they stopped.

"You were going too fast!" She was helping my Gran out of the sidecar.

"I was going *slower* than May wanted me to go."

My Gran got to her feet looking displeased.

"*Gealtaire*," she said to Toni.

"I know you just called me a coward," whose Gaelic was rusty, but not too bad. She had been picking it up over the years.

"*Tolla-thon*."

"Gran!" I protested.

"Okay, what was that? What did the old bugger call me?"

"Nothing," I answered.

My Gran was now walking down her path towards her front door and I knew she was getting a kick out of this. I now had to explain to my partner that my Gran had just called her an asshole. The pair of them together were incorrigible.

I smiled at the memory, the two of them together really did have a lot of fun and, despite outward appearances and the way they spoke to each other, they had built up a really strong bond with each other over the years. I laughed a little as I recalled Toni's reply when I told her what my Gran had said.

"An asshole! I'm the only *arsehole* who will take her out on that rust bucket!"

"What are you smiling at?"

My Gran's words brought me back to the present.

"Nothing, just you two, bickering."

She waved her hand, "Keeps me young."

I believed that.

The evening was very enjoyable and my mum did seem to be managing to find some enjoyment in it, despite the loss of my father. The grandchildren had a big part to play in that. They were a lot of fun, keeping us all entertained. I had noticed that Jack was a little subdued and wondered what was on his mind. I picked up some empty plates and asked him to help me take them through to the kitchen.

"Is everything alright, Jack?"

He looked pensive and agitated as he considered his reply. I laid a hand over his.

"Whatever is troubling you, don't be afraid to tell us. That way we can help if it's possible."

He nodded, but looked terrified. "There is a girl back in Edinburgh - she's pregnant."

Oh, Lord, here we go again. It was like Isobel all over.

"Tell me a little more." I encouraged.

"She says I'm the father. I don't know what to do, Auntie Isobel, it was just the once." He was pleading now, the poor boy. What a position to be in at his age.

"Stay right there, I'll get Toni."

We returned to the kitchen to find Jack looking out the window and nervously wringing his hands together. He looked very pale.

"Is he alright?"

"Well yes, and no - he thinks he may have gotten a girl pregnant."

"Oh." Toni addressed Jack now; he was looking very sheepish, "Is she your girlfriend?"

"No, Toni, it's Andrea from the bar. We got chatting and drinking one night after hours and well she..."

"It's okay, Jack, I can guess the rest. I wouldn't be too concerned, I reckon if she is indeed pregnant, there is a good chance the baby isn't yours."

"Toni!"

"I'm just speaking the truth, Shona. She does have a bit of a reputation. If she has gotten herself pregnant she will have looked around and picked the guy with the best prospects." She turned to Jack again. "Here is what we will do, I'll have a word with her, tell her you will be more than happy to fulfil any financial obligations to the child, pending a paternity test."

That sounded so callous, I wasn't sure I liked it. Toni could tell by the look on my face that I wasn't happy.

"Look, Shona, if Jack is the father, then Andrea will be properly compensated for the child's needs. Any contact would be between Jack and Andrea, but I won't see him not only paying for a child that isn't his, but also believing he has a child when he doesn't. That would be a terrible scenario."

I saw her point, regardless of financial support, it was important Jack knew for sure if he was the father.

"Alright, I agree, that is the best plan."

Jack was looking more relieved by the second, so he obviously was happy with Toni's idea.

"Thanks, Toni, I really appreciate your help."

Isobel picked that moment to enter the kitchen with an empty plate; I knew she would arrive at some point, not able to keep her nose out of whatever was happening in the kitchen.

"Oh, what are you three gossiping about?"

"The next generation," I answered casually.

I watched as her fingers went limp and the plate she was carrying smashed onto the tiled floor. Okay, I could have delivered that news a little better, but I just couldn't resist. Toni gave me a chastising look, but I couldn't hide the little smile that displayed the satisfaction I got from shocking my sister, it made a nice change.

Isobel turned to Jack, "I'm going to be a grandmother? I'm only thirty six years old!"

Toni took pity on her. "Relax, Isobel, I don't think Jack is going to be a daddy just yet."

I'll never forget the look on Isobel's face. It was priceless.

When the time came, a few days later, I was reluctant to leave the island, but I needed to get back to work and fulfil my commitments. Toni was fine, constantly phoning Eddie and knowing he would carry out her instructions, as she would do herself. They were still working together after all these years. He was like her right hand man overseeing any of her bars that were posing a problem. Getting everything back in order with a hands on approach. He really was like the brother she had lost all those years ago. Ross never did manage to straighten himself out, he is still inside, and I still haven't met him.

We said our goodbyes, not sure exactly when some of us might see each other again. I promised my mum that I would be back up on the next long weekend. In April this year, North Uist saw its first Ferry crossing on a Sunday and that means I can now visit and be able to get home on a Sunday evening. It's progress.

Moirá reassured me that she would be looking after mum and would keep me updated as to how she was really doing. My mum would never say she wasn't coping, or ask any of us to come to her aid, it just wasn't in her nature, but she would accept our assistance when we offered it. I hoped she would perhaps make the journey down to Edinburgh in the not too distant future. It would be nice to have her around for a little while. We could go shopping; I could take her to the cinema, and maybe a restaurant. We could go to the theatre or visit the zoo. We now had a chance to catch up on all the things we had missed out on when I was a little girl and, if my mum was willing, I intended to help her take full advantage of her independence. My father was gone, and my mother still had her life to live. I wanted to help her to do just that.

I sat in my office at home, preparing a lecture I would deliver in April. I had received an invite last month asking me to be a guest speaker in the United States as part of National Tartan Day. I was tremendously honoured and wanted to prepare something special. Tartan Day was created so Americans of Scottish descent could celebrate their ancestry and the influence the Scots had had on shaping the United States. I had already written a book on this subject, now I was faced with the task of condensing this information into a one-hour presentation.

I found my mind drifting from the task at hand, back to recent events, the death of my father, how my mother is handling it. She is starting to find her feet and tentatively making plans, which include a visit to Edinburgh.

I then thought about Toni, the woman who has been by my side for almost twenty years. She has been a rock throughout it all. I could never overstate the important role she has played in my life, and how much richer my life is because of her presence in it. I felt an infusion of warmth and peace settle over me, just thinking about her.

I felt her presence and turned to see her leaning in the doorframe looking at me, a smile on her face. She is barefoot, wearing jeans and a tee shirt, looking very relaxed - just like the girl I met all those years ago.

"You were miles away," she remarked.

I smiled, "Just thinking about you."

"Good thoughts I hope."

"Very good thoughts."

Toni held out her hand to me.

"Come to bed?"

How could I refuse this woman anything, especially a request like that? I took her hand and we walked to our bedroom.

We entered the bedroom where Toni took me in her arms and held me close. She placed a loving kiss on the top of my head, a gesture I had come to cherish over the years. She then leaned back and looked intently at me.

"Shona, if it were possible, I would have married you years ago."

I felt my heart rate pick up on hearing those words. Just recently, same sex couples in the United Kingdom had been given the same legal rights as heterosexual couples. The civil partnership act

had come into effect in December 2005. I had assumed it was something Toni wasn't interested in, as she had never mentioned it.

She swallowed before continuing, "I'm now able to make that commitment to you. Shona, will you marry me?"

I didn't hesitate, I nodded rapidly before finding my voice, "Yes, yes I will."

She hugged me tightly to her, "Thank you, you have made me a very happy woman."

I kissed her, trying to put all the love and joy I felt in that moment into the kiss. We broke apart some minutes later.

"I love you, Toni and I can't wait to marry you."

She beamed that beautiful full smile at me.

"I love you too."

The End

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