

~ The Player ~

by weebod

Disclaimer: This is an original story. The main characters and the story are the product of the author's imagination.

Rated NC17: For profanity and sex

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

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Chapter 1

Gillian Rae woke abruptly to the sound of her mobile phone ringing. Opening her eyes she took in the unfamiliar surroundings and wondered, not for the first time, where the hell she was. The woman in the bed next to her sat up and muttered something about her bag. Gill looked blankly at her, only managing to blink a reply. The woman impatiently rose from the bed and thrust Gill's handbag into her lap. Fumbling around inside the bag, Gill located the noisy nuisance and finally answered the call.

"Hello?" she croaked.

"Gill, I'm outside your flat - will you answer the buzzer."

"Julie?"

"Yes..." was the impatient reply as her teammate waited for Gill to catch up. *"Look, get out of bed and buzz me in and I'll help you get ready."*

"Eh, just one little problem, Julie...I'm not at home." Gill scrunched her face up waiting for the onslaught.

"Where the hell are you?"

"Give me a minute, I'll look out the window." Gill opened the thick, dark curtains and looked out onto a bright sunlit street that looked vaguely familiar. Then she remembered the woman in the bed.

"Where am I?" she asked meekly. The woman was sitting up in bed taking Gillian in with a look of complete disbelief.

"Spottiswoode Street."

"Thanks, ah, Julie, I'm not too far away. I'll grab a cab and be with you in under ten minutes." Gill shut off the phone before Julie could say anything more. Turning to her bedmate she tried desperately to recall her name. "Ah, I really have to get going, I'm late for my lift. I've got a game in Glasgow today." Gill was throwing on her blouse and dress trousers from the evening before as she spoke, hopping on one leg as she tried to locate one of her shoes. The woman in the bed continued to watch Gillian, a look of surprise on her face.

"Have you seen my jacket?"

"I think it's in the sitting room."

Gillian smiled, "Thanks."

Returning to the bedroom with her jacket Gillian gave the woman a quick peck on the cheek.

"Will I see you again?"

Gillian didn't miss the forlorn look on the woman's face. "I'll call you later." With those words she rushed from the bedroom and out the front door.

Alone in the bedroom the young woman stared at the now empty space beside and muttered, "It would help if you knew my number."

Julie Reid sat in her car and watched as a taxi pulled up across the road from the Canongate Kirk. She got out of her vehicle as Gillian jogged across the road to meet her.

"You're in last night's clothes, look at the state of you."

"I'm packed, don't worry, I just have to shower and throw on my tracksuit and we can go. I'll grab some breakfast at the garage."

Julie followed Gillian into her flat. "You don't have time for a shower, Gill."

"Two minutes, I promise."

Julie watched as Gillian stripped naked in front of her before quickly making her way to the bathroom. Gill was never one for modesty and she had been naked in front of Julie countless times after training and hockey matches, but Julie had found it a little different standing there in Gill's flat. As promised, Gill was pulling on her tracksuit two minutes later, then thrusting her bare feet into a pair of training shoes. She picked up her kitbag and sticks then smiled winningly at Julie. "Lets go."

As they walked towards her car, Julie's mobile phone rang. "Hello?" Julie opened the boot for Gill to deposit her bags into. "Yes, we're on our way, my fault I had a little car trouble, everything is fine now, we'll be with you in fifteen minutes."

Gill frowned as she sat in the passenger seat. "You didn't have to do that, I would have taken the blame."

Starting the car, Julie pulled out onto the main road. "I know, but Val is in a bad mood with you at the best of times, no point pouring petrol on the flames."

"Thank you."

"Anytime."

"I'm sorry, Julie, last night was totally unexpected."

Julie glanced briefly at Gill, "So who was she?"

Gillian rubbed her forehead trying to recall more about the previous evening, but failed to come up with a name. "I dunno, a friend of someone at work."

"A teacher?"

"I'm not sure, it'll come back to me."

The pair stared at each other and burst out laughing.

"What's it like being you, Gillian?"

"What do you mean?"

Julie kept her eye on the road. "You are so carefree, nothing ties you down."

Gill gave that statement some consideration. "We do the same job, we both have a mortgage and a car. The only difference is you have a husband."

Julie nodded, a thoughtful look on her face, "True."

The pair fell silent, both left to their own thoughts. As Gillian closed her eyes and rested her head back on the seat, Julie snuck a quick look at her friend and she shook her head, a fond smile on her face. Gillian was like a wild tiger and Julie doubted she could ever be tamed. She lived life to the full and enjoyed every minute of it.

As Julie pulled into the car park on the outskirts of the city, Gillian opened her eyes. She caught sight of Valerie's face; it was like thunder. "Thanks again, Julie."

Julie winked at her friend, "Anytime." She opened the car door and held up her hand in apology. "Sorry folks, Gill was ready, all my fault."

It wasn't the end of the world that the pair were a little late. The team always allowed plenty of time to get to away matches, as Saturday traffic could catch you out unexpectedly, what with all the sport going on all over the country, but there were still a few glowers sent their way. Gillian smiled good-naturedly and shrugged, what could she do? They would get over it.

As they approached the team, who were standing around waiting, Val was ready to go off on one. "Where the hell have you been?"

"As I explained, I had a little car trouble."

Valerie turned her anger on Gillian. "How come you are always involved?"

Gill simply shrugged and held eye contact with the irate woman.

"You are always a problem."

The team captain, Sheila, stepped in. "Come on, Val, cut Gillian some slack, Julie already explained that she had car trouble."

Gill and Val continued to stare at each other, Gillian refusing to look away, not saying a word. Finally it was Val who spoke adding, "We better get going." Before storming off towards her car.

Gillian pulled a face at the retreating woman's back, which raised a few giggles, but everyone was treading on eggshells around the temperamental Valerie Smith.

"Looks like Val's driving." Sheila looked around at the rest of the team. "We need four cars. Julie you better leave yours since it's playing up. I'll take you and Gill with me, keep you away from Valerie for a bit longer. Lindy, Sharon and Sarah, you go with Valerie."

"Looks like we've drawn the short straw, girls." Sharon declared.

"You three piss her off the least, so it makes our lives easier." Sheila reasoned. "Hilary, you travel with us and the rest of you go in Camilla and Fay's cars, you can sort it out between you."

With the traveling arrangements made, the fifteen players and Scott, their coach, headed to Glasgow.

Gillian and Julie made themselves comfortable in the back of Sheila's car, while Hilary took the passenger seat.

"Will you be stopping for petrol, Sheila?"

Sheila eyed Gillian using her rear view mirror. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving."

"Skip breakfast did you?" She enquired knowingly.

Gillian gave her trademark quirky little grin, "Something like that."

Sheila shook her head. "I'll stop at Harthill services."

"Thanks, Sheila."

Hilary turned in her seat to look at Gillian. "You're an asshole and Julie, you shouldn't be covering for her." The Doctor's smile softening the severity of her words.

"What can I say, Hilary, I got lucky."

Hilary laughed, "You can say no, Gillian."

"Where is the fun in that?"

"Gill, if you don't have a stormer today, I'm going to drop you for next week." Sheila declared.

Gill laughed, "What and play Val for fifty minutes instead of twenty?"

At that moment Gill's mobile phone rang. "Hi, Maggie, thanks for a lovely evening."

"Where the hell are you?"

Gillian pulled the phone from her ear and eyed it suspiciously; all eyes in the car were on her. "I'm on the M8 on my way to Glasgow, why?"

"Why the hell is Hannah calling me this morning asking for your number?"

"Hannah?" Gillian paused in thought, "Oh yeah, we shared a cab home last night."

"Don't start with me, Gillian, what the hell did you do?"

Gillian wanted to end this conversation fast. "Look, I'm in a car full of teammates, can we discuss this later?"

"I'm going to strangle you, not only is Hannah the new English teacher for next term, she is engaged to be married!"

"Okay, Maggie, I'll call you later. Bye."

"Gillian, don't you dare ha..."

Gillian pressed the off button before Maggie McLure, her assistant head teacher, could finish her sentence. She turned to look at Julie who was desperately trying not to laugh. "Don't say a word," she cautioned, but it was Hilary who broke the silence.

"Like I said, Gillian, you are a prize asshole."

Gillian sat with her arms folded as the other three occupants shared at laugh at her expense.

"Well done ladies, that was a good away result." Sheila praised her team on a hard fought win. "We now have a chance of finishing fourth in the league this year. That would be Dunedin's highest ever finish in the top division."

The players were all stripping off their sweaty clothes in preparation for a hot shower. The dressing room was buoyant, with the players in an upbeat mood. Gillian was struggling in the corner to untie her shoelaces.

"Let me see your fingers, Gillian?"

Gillian clasped her hand close to her bare chest, "No, no, Hilary, they're just a little bruised."

Hilary rolled her eyes impatiently, "For goodness sake, let me see them." She walked towards Gillian and grappled her hand from her chest.

"Look, full range of movement." Gillian wiggled her fingers for effect, "See, just bruised."

Hilary closely examined the swollen fingers of Gillian's right hand. "Hmm, you've taken quite a whack."

Hilary squeezed the fingers, then bent them to double check, which caused Gillian to pull her hand away.

"Ouch!" Gill shook her hand to ease the pain. "You're a sadistic bitch, Hilary."

The orthopaedic doctor looked at Gill with a glint in her eye. "Nothing broken I'm sure, but if they swell up, go to the hospital for an x-ray."

"Yeah, thanks, Hilary, I am positive you have a dungeon of pain in your basement."

Hilary laughed, "Get some ice on your fingers as soon as possible."

That evening Gillian took the twenty-minute walk to her best friend Justine's flat. They had been pals since they met at high school and almost inseparable since. She picked up their order from the Indian take-away that was literally around the corner from Justine's place, then headed to the tenement flat that Justine shared with her four year old daughter, Charlotte. The bouncy little girl was still awake when Gillian arrived at the second floor flat.

"Gilly, Gilly!"

"Hiya, Charlotte." Gillian looked at Justine.

"She refused to go to bed until you arrived."

Gillian smiled and bent down to ruffle Charlotte's mass of red curls. "Shall I put you to bed? I'll read you a story, while your Mum sorts out my dinner."

"Uhuh."

Gillian handed Justine the brown bag full of takeaway, then picked Charlotte up and walked to her bedroom. Depositing the precious little bundle into her bed, Gillian asked which book Charlotte would like her to read. The little hands produced a book from under her pillow.

"This one!"

"Oh, one of my favourites." Gill took a seat on the side of Charlotte's bed and began to read. "There was an old woman who swallowed a fly, oh, I met one today who was chewing a wasp." Gill flicked the end of Charlotte's nose with her finger and the youngster giggled.

"You can't eat wasps, Gilly."

Gill smiled, "True, she just looked like she was. Let me start again..."

Five minutes later Gill closed the book and laid it gently on the little table next to Charlotte's bed. She softly kissed the youngsters forehead and whispered goodnight, closing the bedroom door quietly behind her then headed to the kitchen.

"Where's my dinner, woman, I'm starving."

"I popped it in the oven to keep warm, I'll just serve it."

Gill followed Justine to the kitchen and sat at the table.

"How did the game go today?"

"Was good, we won."

"You score?"

"Yeah, a couple of goals."

Justine started opening the cartons and placing them on the table along with the rice and Naan bread. "How many is that for the season?"

"Twenty-four."

"In how many games?"

"Twenty-one, just the one game left."

"You keep that up, they will have to select you for the national team."

"Eat your dinner, Justine." Gillian started scooping some Rogan Josh onto her plate, not wanting to discuss the matter further.

"Wait and see, your time will come, Gillian."

Gill didn't respond, instead she bit into a mouthful of Naan bread covered in curry. "Mmm, you have to try this, it's gorgeous."

The pair spent the next hour enjoying their food and some small talk, before making their way to the living room.

"I'm stuffed!" Gillian declared as she patted her full stomach, "I couldn't eat another thing."

"Oh, that's a shame, because I made banoffee pie this afternoon."

"Let me rephrase, I meant I couldn't eat another thing *right now*."

Justine laughed, knowing it was Gill's favourite, "We can have some half way through the film."

"What rubbish do you have me watching this week?"

Justine rolled her eyes, "I know you like the films, Gillian, you just won't admit it."

"Come on, out with it."

"Made Of Honour."

Gillian looked dubious.

"I've heard good things about it."

"Okay, put it on. Let's have a look."

"Are you going to stop laughing?"

Gillian had tears in her eyes, "I'm allowed to laugh, it's a comedy."

"Yes, but you're not laughing at the humour in the film."

Gillian took a deep breath and composed herself. "Honestly, I did enjoy it, but those scenes in the highlands..." she cracked up again and Justine joined her.

"Oh, dear," Gillian wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes. "Do you have a match tomorrow?"

"Nope, the volleyball season is finished. I'm going over to my Mum's for lunch, me and Charlotte will spend most of the day there."

Gillian yawned, "Good stuff, I think I'm going to hit the road."

Justine looked at the clock, it was almost midnight. "You going home?"

"No, I think I'll take a walk by C.C. Blooms first."

Justine shook her head, "Do you never stop, woman?"

"Well I'm not going to get lucky here am I?"

"I doubt you're going to get lucky anywhere with those fingers."

Gillian wagged her tongue, "I still have this."

"Give it over, Gillian." Justine reprimanded her friend.

"You don't know what you're missing," Gill teased.

"Time for you to go I think."

The pair shared a hug.

"I'll catch up with you during the week, okay."

"Sure thing, Gill, night."

Chapter 2

"Did you get parked okay?" Gill asked Julie as she entered her flat.

"No problem, thanks for letting me stay, it would have been hellish trying to get a cab all the way back to Macmerry tonight."

"You are more than welcome to my sofa bed anytime." Gill took Julie's overnight bag and stored it away in a corner of her living room.

"What made you choose a flat in this area?" Julie asked as she looked around.

"I just love the centre of town. I know you get less for your money, but all I need is the one bedroom, it suits me fine. Also I can walk everywhere in the evening and at weekends, I only need the car for school and hockey."

"What do you plan to do with your summer holidays? Six weeks off, Gillian, a lot of time to fill."

Gillian smiled, "I'll play summer hockey, volleyball too, that will take up a few evenings and weekends. I'll catch up with family and friends and I'm going on holiday. What about you?"

Julie sighed, "Neil is very busy with the youth team, so we won't be able to get away, not that we ever do. I usually holiday with my Mum or my sister, Neil never goes away unless it's a football thing."

"Come on holiday with me?"

Julie looked at Gillian, "Really? Your friends won't mind?"

Gill laughed, "God no, the more the merrier. We're off to Tunisia for a week, just book the flights, no need to worry about accommodation, there will always be a bed available somewhere."

"It would be great to get some sun."

"I'll book the flights for you, that okay? We can sort out the cash later."

"Thanks, Gill. I'm already looking forward to going. My summer break was sounding very boring."

"Neil won't mind you going away with us?"

Julie shook her head, "He will hardly notice I'm gone." The sad smile that accompanied the statement spoke volumes.

"You'll have a good time, Julie, I promise."

"Great. Now we better watch our time. The meal is at 7.30 p.m sharp."

"Let me just add the finishing touches to my make-up, then we can grab a cab."

They sat respectfully at the tables as the after dinner speeches and awards got underway at the end of season dinner. It was a reasonably long process since Dunedin Ladies was a fairly big hockey club. Finally they got to the first team and Sheila and Scott made their respective speeches, which only left the player of the year award to be presented.

"And finally we come to the first team player of the year award. This season's recipient has played in every game, keeping up a high standard of hockey. The skill she brings to the game is the envy of many of her peers. Ladies and gentlemen will you please be up standing for Camilla 'Cammo' Cameron."

There was lots of applause as Camilla made her way to the top table to receive her award.

"Speech, speech."

Gill and Julie looked on as Camilla gave her acceptance speech. Julie leaned close to Gillian's ear, "Do you not get fed up, never winning?"

Gill turned to her friend, "Cammo had a fantastic season."

"True, and last year I thought she fully deserved player of the year, but this year you scored more goals in the top league than any Dunedin player has ever managed before. It should have been yours this year."

Gill smiled sincerely at Julie, "That's kind of you to say, but I'm absolutely fine with the choice that's been made."

Julie nodded her acceptance, "Come on, let's get a proper drink from the bar, no more of this cheap wine."

Gillian laughed, "I'm with you on that one."

The night was full of fun and frolics and, as always, there were some hi-jinks towards the end of the evening as some of the players got very drunk. Gillian had consumed a fair amount herself,

but not as much as her nemesis, Valerie, who had been downing the Glayva like it was going out of fashion. The evening came to a crashing halt when a drinks tray was throw over one of the cubicles in the ladies' toilets and a scream was heard from inside. One of the younger players then appeared from inside the cubicle holding the bridge of her nose, which was pouring with blood.

Gillian grabbed a roll of toilet paper and started trying to stem the flow of blood, while Julie went in search of Hilary. "Christ, Valerie what were you thinking?"

"Oh, shut up, Gillian." was the indignant reply.

Valerie swayed near the sinks and if she felt Gillian knew she would make no attempt to help her. "Look at the state of her." Gillian gestured to the second team player, whose name escaped her. "What the hell possessed you to throw a tray into a toilet cubicle?"

Valerie waved her arms in a histrionic fashion. "I was having fun, Gillian. Something you have plenty of, am I not allowed?"

"Not when it involves harming others, Valerie," came the stern reply from Hilary Duffy. Hilary stood in front of the injured girl to get a good look at the damage caused. "Hmm, just a small nick, fortunately it won't need stitches, which means you won't have to wait in Accident and Emergency on a Saturday night. That's the good news. The bad news is that you are going to have a small scar and probably two black eyes for the next week or so. What's your name?"

"Carly."

"Okay, Carly. Do you live with your parents?"

"Yes, until I start University after the summer."

"I'm going to give you a lift home and explain to your parents what's happened. And tomorrow, Valerie is going to come to your house and apologise for her behaviour and she can explain to your Mum why her precious daughter is going to have a little scar on the bridge of her nose." Hilary turned to the petulant looking Valerie. "Isn't that right?"

Valerie gave a dismissive gesture with her hand. "Yes."

Hilary left with an arm around the injured Carly's shoulder. Valerie watched her go and Gillian had a sneaky feeling that the woman wasn't as drunk as she was making out.

"Did you enjoy that, Gillian? Me getting a dressing down from the mighty Doctor Hilary Duffy."

"No."

"Oh go off and have one of your little conquests, Gillian."

"I would feel sorry for you, Valerie, but then you're a right poisonous bitch."

"And you're an immature brat who is a disgrace to the teaching profession!"

"I'm a disgrace? You're the one who has now assaulted two teammates and you are calling me a disgrace?" Gillian had never told any of her teammates that Valerie had once slapped her across the face in a fit of anger.

"Come on, Gill let's go, she's drunk."

Gill looked at her friend, "She's not that drunk. I think she just got the wrong cubicle, I was in the one at the end."

Valerie wouldn't look at Gillian and Gill had her answer, the tray was meant for her.

The hotheaded woman left the ladies' toilets leaving Gill and Julie alone. "What other player has Valerie assaulted?"

"Oh, it's nothing, forget it."

Julie stepped in front of Gill, preventing her from leaving. "What other player, Gillian?"

Gill sighed, "That would be me."

"What! When?"

"Not long after I joined the club, we had a bad result. I went to the loo, as I always do, after the game. When I came out of the cubicle Val was standing there cursing and moaning about a lack of general fitness amongst the team. Now she personally had a nightmare that game, missed at least two sitters. I pointed out that fitness could only take you so far and we needed to improve our skill levels to progress as a team. She went red in the face and slapped me." Gill shrugged and Julie looked horrified.

"What did you do?"

"I said I wouldn't be intimidated by a bully, and I stared at her until she stormed off - then I rubbed my stinging cheek."

"Why didn't you hit her back?"

"It's just not me, Julie, I don't believe in violence, but I won't allow her to intimidate me."

"She is an absolute bitch, I can't believe she hit you."

"Think about it, when I joined the club three years ago, she started to get less time on the pitch. The woman will do anything to remain in the first team. Lets be honest, she's no longer good

enough and that's a simple fact. The game is getting faster, especially up front and she is getting slower. She should have been dropped a year ago, at least, but people are too afraid to upset her."

Julie knew it to be the truth, "I can't argue with that."

"Anyway, enough about her. The night is still young, let's go have some fun."

The pair took a taxi into town and got out at C.C. Blooms, joining the small queue that was starting to form.

"Don't worry, we will be inside within five minutes."

"I've never been in a gay bar, Gill, will it be all right?"

Gill laughed, "Don't worry, it will be like any other bar you go to, the only difference being, the females will be eyeing you up, not the males."

"That simple, huh?"

Gill shrugged, "It can be. Just relax, if a woman asks you to dance, if you want to dance, then go ahead, if she tries to kiss you..." Julie was hanging on Gill's every word. "You're on your own." Gill laughed when Julie playfully punched her arm. "Look, what do you do when a guy asks you to dance?"

"Sometimes I dance, sometimes I refuse."

"And when a guy attempts to kiss you?"

"I politely decline and tell him I'm married."

"Well, there you go. Why should it be different with a woman?"

Julie frowned. "They won't get pissed off that I'm into men?"

Gill smiled at her friend, "This place is full of straight women, well, so they say."

"Really?"

"It's not a rule that you have to be gay to get in. Just relax."

"Okay."

"One thing though, don't be surprised at who you might meet."

"What do you mean?"

"Trust me, you always see someone you don't expect to see. I've met school pupils in here, married members of staff. A husband of my sister's friend."

"Oh my God, what did you do?"

"Nothing, it's not my business."

"What about your sister's friend?"

Gill shook her head, "It's not my business. That's the best way to handle these things."

Julie nodded her agreement, as the doorwoman greeted them.

"Evening."

"Hi there." Gillian greeted the familiar figure at the door.

"Hey, Gill. Have a nice night."

"Cheers, Sheena."

"Come here often?" Julie joked.

"Most weekends. What would you like to drink?"

"A bottle of Bud."

As Gillian pushed her way forward to the bar, Julie looked at her surroundings. She wasn't sure exactly what she expected, but first impression was that the guys looked trendier than normal. Other than that, she could be in any bar in town."

"Here you go." Gillian took a drink from her bottle of Bud as she handed Julie the other one.
"There is a dance-floor downstairs if you fancy it?"

"Oh, there's a downstairs too?"

Gill grinned, "Sure is."

The pair made their way downstairs to the sweaty, noise filled room below. Gill greeted some people on the way, but didn't linger. She led Julie to a rail that looked onto the dance-floor. The place wasn't quite full, but it was getting there.

"Is this where you usually stand?" Julie shouted her question over the loud music.

"Yeah, I like to see what's going on around me." Gill said close to Julie's ear, making sure she heard the reply.

Julie nodded, then continued to scan the dance-floor. "Some of the guys are fantastic movers."

Gill nodded, then pointed to a guy in the corner. "Keep an eye on him, he is really good."

"What?"

Gill moved closer to Julie and spoke directly into her ear. "The guy in the corner wearing the crushed yellow v-neck shirt, keep an eye on him, he's really good."

Julie nodded as she located the young guy in question. She turned to Gill, "He looks about fifteen!"

Gill smiled and shrugged. Julie shook her head in wonder then became mesmerised when the boy began to dance.

"He's amazing!"

Gill nodded and continued to move to the beat.

Julie laughed when the next track was played. "Is this your song?"

Gill smiled and started really dancing to 'Womaniser' by Britney Spears. Before she could blink, Julie found herself the object of Gill's charms. With her back to the rail and Gill's hands either side of her grasping it. Julie was only an inch shorter than Gill but, at that moment, she felt every centimetre of it, as Gill stood to her full five foot eight inches and stared straight into Julie's eyes, with a look that promised many things. As Gill continued to move her head to the music with a sexy smile on her lips, Julie could see why women fell for her, then as quickly as it began, Gill was back standing next to Julie singing along with the song.

"You want another?" Julie gestured to Gill's almost empty beer bottle, while holding up her own.

Gill nodded and Julie headed off to the bar. As she waited patiently to be served by the barman she noticed that there was no queuing system, and after a few minutes she wondered if she would ever be served.

"Gary! Gary!"

The barman turned to look at the woman shouting his name.

"This woman's been waiting ages."

Gary nodded and indicated he would just be a minute.

Julie turned to her saviour, "Thank you, I thought I was going to be here all night."

"The woman smiled, "Gary is a sucker for a pretty face, so long as it's a guy. In almost any other bar in this city, you would have been served first."

Julie knew she was being complimented, but was uncertain as to how to respond.

"I'm Rhonda," The woman held out her hand, "Nice to meet you."

Julie shook the woman's hand, "I'm Julie."

The barman finally served Julie.

"You with a friend?" Rhonda asked.

Julie pointed over to where Gill was standing.

"Oh, you're with Gillian," The woman winked. "You'll have a really fun night." Then she was gone, leaving Julie wondering if she was one of Gill's conquests.

Julie returned to the spot at the rail and handed Gill her beer. "I met a woman at the bar."

"Oh, lucky you." Gill joked.

"Her name was Rhonda, she seemed to know you."

"Oh, yeah, I know Rhonda. A little butch looking?"

Julie nodded. "Is she an ex?"

"Oh no, I'm her type, but she's not mine."

"What does that mean?"

"We both like femmes. So, she's into my look, but I'm not into hers."

"She seems nice."

Gill agreed. "Rhonda is lovely."

"But you won't sleep with her?"

"Nope."

"Because of how she looks?"

"Noooo, because of what she wants."

"What does that mean? You're talking in riddles."

Gill rolled her eyes. "Rhonda wants to wear a strappy and fuck a woman all night."

Julie blinked, "And what do you want to do?"

Gill smiled, "The same." then burst out laughing. "You should see your face, Julie, it's a picture."

"Is that what you really like to do?"

Gill shrugged, "Sometimes."

Julie swallowed more of her beer as she mulled that information over. She just wasn't sure if Gillian was serious or not.

Gillian grabbed her hand. "Come on, let's dance."

It was two hours and several beers later when the pair walked out of the hot club and into a cool May evening.

"Oh damn, look at the taxi queue."

Gill waved away Julie's complaint. "We don't need a taxi, it's only a ten minute walk."

Julie scrunched her face up. "Are you sure?"

"Course I'm sure. C'mon, I know a short cut." Gill beckoned Julie to follow her.

The pair headed towards the Old Town, both sporting a slight stagger after the amount of alcohol they had consumed.

"I still can't believe Valerie slapped you."

"Oh forget all about her, she's a bitch."

Julie nodded, "Yes she is, in fact, she's a fucking bitch."

"Ooh, you swore."

"I know, but I think it was called for."

Gill nodded her head, "I agree, in fact, I would go so far as to say, she is a nasty fucking bitch."

Julie thought about that for a moment. "You're right, she is."

The pair burst out laughing and ended up with an arm around the others waist as they tackled the final uphill walk to Gill's flat. Once there, Julie flopped down on the large sofa.

"My feet are killing me!"

"That's what happens when you wear high heels." Gillian replied, as she attempted to pull out the sofa bed, only to stagger backwards onto her butt.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Making up your bed."

"Forget it, I'll sleep here."

"Okay, I'll go get some bedding."

"I'll help."

Gill opened a cupboard in her bedroom and pointed to the top shelf. "It's up there. We need to get a sheet and a duvet cover and pillow slips." Gill turned to look at Julie when she didn't answer. Her friend was sitting on the neatly made double bed.

"Can't I just share with you? It will save all the hassle of making up a bed for me."

Gill shrugged. "I don't see why not." She went to her chest of drawers and pulled out a vest top and shorts.

Julie yawned. "Thanks, Gill. I'll go get my night clothes and pop to the loo."

Gill watched the departing Julie go, then changed into her sleepwear and waited for the bathroom to empty.

"Thanks, Gill, it's all yours."

"Great, be back in a few minutes."

When Gill returned from the bathroom she burst out laughing at the sight before her. "You've been snooping around my bedroom."

"I knew you would have a few of these."

"And you don't?"

"Some of them." Julie held up a rampant rabbit vibrator, "Like this for instance, but certainly not these." She motioned towards Gill's harness and various dildos. "I mean look at this one." Julie held up a seven inch black silicone spiked dildo. "It's not exactly a replica of a penis."

Gill smiled, "There is a lot more to that than meets the eye."

Julie examined the phallus closer, but looked doubtful. "Really?"

"Mmhmm." Gill lifted a small object from the bed. "You see this little bullet?" She held up the silver object for Julie to look at. "You twist the top," It started to vibrate in Julie's hand, "Then you pop it inside that dildo like so." She demonstrated what to do for Julie, then handed her the now vibrating dildo. "You attach the dildo to the harness and double your pleasure."

Julie stared at the vibrating dildo, then at the harness. She then turned to look at Gill, her face suddenly serious. "Put it on?"

Gill swallowed and felt her heart rate pick up, she knew where it would lead if she put on the harness. She nodded slowly, "Okay." They held eye contact, and Gill knew exactly what Julie was asking. Taking the dildo from Julie's hands, Gill inserted it into the harness. She then slid her shorts down her legs and stepped into the harness, fitting it snugly to her hips and thighs. Watching Julie intently, Gill removed her vest, leaving her standing naked with the phallus protruding proudly from between her legs.

Julie watched avidly as Gill knelt on the bed, before resting on her side facing Julie.

"What do you think?" she asked her blonde companion.

Julie swallowed hard and licked her lips, the only sound in the room coming from the faint buzzing, which was emanating from the bullet vibrator inside the dildo.

"Very nice."

Gill didn't miss the husky quality that had seeped into Julie's voice. Pushing the various toys onto the floor, she eased closer to Julie, who giggled when the dildo prodded her leg. Gill smiled, "Why don't you touch it?" Gill watched with rapt attention as Julie fondled the dildo, moving her hand slowly up and down its length. It was Gill's undoing and she swiftly pulled Julie's head towards her own for a hard passionate kiss, to which Julie instantly responded. They both assisted with the hasty removal of Julie's shorts and vest and, as their bodies came together, Gill could feel the length of dildo press on her stomach as it became sandwiched between them. As Julie pushed Gill onto her back, she watched as the blonde knelt over her, the space between the dildo and her small patch of blonde hair decreasing rapidly as she bent towards it. Gillian slid down the bed and put her mouth where the tip of the dildo had just been. Julie gasped at the contact from Gill's mouth. Her thighs trembled with the effort of trying to stay upright while Gill used her mouth to pleasure her. Just as Julie's legs were about to give way, Gillian moved back

up towards the pillows. She then put her hands around Julie's waist and guided the blonde towards the dildo watching with great pleasure as it disappeared inside her, releasing a sigh from Julie's lips.

Gill rolled her hips slightly as she held Julie in place, but soon the pace started to increase and before long Julie was working hard as she bounced around on top of Gillian, her glorious breasts swaying before Gill's eyes. Grabbing two handfuls, Gill massaged Julie's breasts and met her thrust for thrust, which soon had the blonde screaming her orgasm and, shortly afterwards, collapsing on top of Gillian, who held her as she caught her breath. Gill then flipped her over and started again.

"All night?" Julie asked.

"All night." Gill promised.

Gill awoke to a thumping headache. Her eyes were still closed as she rubbed her head. Shifting in the bed she was aware of something catching on the duvet, preventing her turning easily. As she reached down blindly with one hand she bumped the dildo.

"Oh God," she croaked, wondering who was lying next to her. Rubbing her eyes, they slowly began to open and then focus. Gill turned to her right and saw a mop of blonde hair and a tanned arm. Then everything came back to her. She had been to the end of season dinner then went to C.C. Blooms with Julie, then... *'Oh, dear God.'* Gill reached down, pushed the duvet aside, and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Fumbling with the harness she eventually released it and stood, letting it fall to the floor with a soft thud. Gill then made her way, on shaky legs, to the bathroom, which was quickly followed by a trip to the kitchen in search of some juice.

"Bring me something to drink, will you, Gill?"

"Su..." Gill cleared her throat and tried again. "Sure, what would you like?"

"Water is fine."

Gill grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and walked more steadily back to the bedroom.
"Morning."

Julie smiled, "Good morning."

Gill handed the water to Julie and got back into bed. She waited as Julie cracked the top on the water and took a few gulps of the cold liquid. She couldn't help but notice Julie's breasts as the duvet slipped below them; they really were fabulous and full. Julie wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and put the water on the bedside cabinet, before turning to look at Gillian.
"You're quiet this morning?"

"Ah, bit of a hangover."

"You sure that's all?"

"Well, I don't know whether I should be apologising or not for last night?"

Julie frowned, "Why on earth should you apologise?"

Gillian shrugged, "I'm hoping you don't think I took advantage of you, or anything."

"Trust me, Gillian, I wasn't the one taken advantage of." She looked sincerely at Gill, "And I can tell you something else, Rhonda was right."

Gillian was confused. "What about?"

"When I told her I was with you, she winked and said I would have a really fun night. And I certainly did."

"So you don't regret it?" Gillian was relieved.

"Not at all, in fact, I wouldn't mind doing it again sometime."

"But..."

Julie put a finger over Gill's mouth to keep her quiet. "No strings attached, just a little fun over the summer?"

Gill smiled, "Sounds good to me."

Chapter 3

Gill made her way into the sports clinic. She wasn't in much pain, but knew her left leg just wasn't working properly since she had taken a whack on it during a mixed hockey game two days ago. It was the strangest thing.

"Hi," Gill greeted the receptionist behind the modern desk. "I'm Gillian Rae, I have an appointment for 2.30 p.m."

The smartly dressed middle-aged woman nodded as she looked at the computer screen. "If you take a seat, the physio will be with you shortly."

"Thanks." Gill did as requested and sat in one of the comfortable chairs. There was a table in front of her stacked with various magazines. Gill let her eyes glance over the titles, but nothing interested her. Instead, she took in her surroundings. Various charts and posters adorned the walls, advertising everything from back pain relief to insoles. Gill shuddered involuntarily at the skeleton in the corner, wondering who thought that was necessary.

"Gillian Rae?"

Gill looked up to see a tall, blue-eyed blonde smiling at her. Things were definitely looking up. "Hi, I'm Gill Rae."

The blonde smiled, showing a nice set of white teeth. She shook Gill's hand firmly as she introduced herself. "I'm Annabel Morgan, your physiotherapist. If you'd just like to follow me."

Gill followed, not missing the perfect posture of the woman or her equally lovely backside as she walked into the treatment room. Gillian was no stranger to physiotherapy and easily recognised the various pieces of equipment surrounding her.

"If you'll take a seat."

"Thanks."

"So, what seems to be the problem?"

"I was hit on the thigh playing hockey a couple of nights ago. It hurt and I thought I had a dead leg but, yesterday, I noticed that I can't sprint. I'm not really experiencing any pain, but when I sprint my leg isn't coming back through as it should, I'm having to wait for it. I know it sounds odd, but that's the only way I can describe it."

The physio nodded as she took notes. She stopped writing and looked at Gill. "When you were hit, was your foot planted?"

Gill shook her head, "No, I was running past a guy when he swung his stick at me, it hit my thigh as I was sprinting past him." Gill demonstrated.

"So the impact occurred as you were moving your leg forward, before planting your foot?"

"Yes."

Again, Annabel nodded. "If you would like to remove your tracksuit bottoms and sit up on the table."

Gill knew the drill and was wearing shorts under her bottoms. She removed her tracksuit and took a seat on the state of the art physio table, stretching her legs out in front of her along its surface. Gill waited whilst Annabel adjusted the table to the height she required.

"Well it's obvious where the impact was."

Gill smiled, the bruising plainly evident. She kept her leg relaxed as Annabel palpated the area and did her best not to tense as the physiotherapist worked closer to the centre of her injury.

"Not too much pain?"

"Not really, it's more the problem of not being able to sprint."

"You can jog and run, but not sprint?"

Gill nodded, "That's right."

"You have some damage to one of your quads, rectus femoris to be more precise. It's a distal strain, just a small tear."

"Can you speed up the healing process?"

Annabel nodded, "Yes. The thing about this injury is that you can continue to play and train, so it won't affect your overall fitness too much. The one thing you can't do is sprint. Any activity below sprinting is absolutely fine."

This was good news for Gillian because she hated to be inactive. "Great, so how long till I can sprint again?"

"Hopefully in less than a month, but it's important that you don't sprint during that time, no matter how tempting it may be, you have to limit yourself." Annabel looked knowingly at Gill.

"It will be tough, but I'll do it, I don't want this injury to linger into the start of the new season."

"How far away is that?"

"Five weeks."

"Well, if you do as you're told, all should be well."

"What makes you think I won't?" Gill knew they were flirting a little, but it was harmless.

Annabel smiled, before turning to set up a machine in the corner, giving Gill another view of her pert bottom. *'Who said physio couldn't be painless'?* Gill smiled at her own thought.

Gill walked out into the bright Friday afternoon sunshine. She was on holiday for six weeks and

was really looking forward to winding down. The injury wasn't going to put too much of a dampener on her plans. She could still enjoy the fun games of mixed hockey and go to the gym, it wasn't all bad. Taking in a deep lungful of warm air, Gill contemplated what she would do with the rest of her afternoon, maybe a bit of shopping. The ring of her mobile phone interrupted her musing. Smiling, Gill answered. "Hi, Julie, what's up?"

"Hi, Gill, I was in town shopping at John Lewis and wondered if you were free?"

"I'm on Broughton Street right now, not far from you at all. Meet you outside the Omni Centre in five minutes?"

"Great, see you soon."

Gill's smile got bigger as she wondered if this day could get any better. An afternoon delight, she hadn't had one of those in a while. With an added spring to her step, Gill quickly walked up towards the Omni Centre to meet Julie.

Julie was standing just beyond the crossing, her John Lewis bags in her hands. She looked very summery in her flared jeans and bright yellow top that showed off her magnificent breasts. Her flip-flops finished off the look perfectly.

"Would you like some help?"

"I got a bit carried away. I love that shop." Julie's smile was wide, showing her full set of perfect teeth. She looked more American girl next door than Scottish teacher.

"So I see." Gill took a couple of the bags, instantly lightening Julie's load. "Is there anything in particular you would like to do?"

"It was just a spur of the moment thing, I knew I was near your flat and thought I would give you a call."

Gill knew where this was leading and decided to speed proceedings along. "Are you hungry? Horny? Or both?"

"Are you always so direct?"

"Come on, time's a wasting, which is it?"

"Both."

"Good, so am I. We can pick up some food from the deli on the way down the high street." Gill started to walk, but Julie didn't follow.

"What about my car and the bags?"

"To be honest you're better off leaving it here in the car park and picking it up later. I'll walk you back up."

"Can we at least put the bags in the boot?" Julie asked with a hint of exasperation.

Gill shrugged, "Okay, lead the way." As Gill followed her blonde companion she knew that for all Julie's attributes, and there were some very significant ones, she would never fall for her. She was just too high maintenance at times.

"What on earth happened to your leg?"

Gill looked down at her naked form; one thigh entangled in the bed sheets, the other exposed, showing the purple bruise. "I was hit playing mixed hockey the other night."

"I don't know why we play that game. There are too many unskilled idiots running around with a stick in their hand."

"True, but I enjoy the change from the tension surrounding the more serious stuff."

"I'll bet the guy did it on purpose." Julie stated distastefully.

"Ack, who knows, it wouldn't be the first time."

"That's my point, last season it was a guy who flicked his stick into your mouth."

"I would have been fine if I had been wearing my gum shield." Gill remembered the incident clearly and the feeling of all the broken bits of tooth in her mouth.

"That's not the point, Gillian, you could get seriously hurt. These guys get pissed off that you are better than them."

"Maybe so, but the other guys on our team always sort it out though."

"After you have been assaulted!"

Gill frowned as she looked at Julie, she seemed particularly irritated. "What's up with you, Julie? You usually laugh this stuff off and call me a masochist or something."

"Ahh, nothing, I've just been a little tense lately."

"Problems at home?"

"Do you always have to go straight to the heart of the matter?"

"You're in my bed, if everything was fine, I doubt you would be here."

Julie sat up and leaned her back against the headboard, the sheets pooled around her waist.

"You're right, if everything was fine, I wouldn't be here. In fact, despite what we said the night of the club dinner, I had decided not to contact you again after last week. I came into town today and planned to shop and drive back home, but I ended up calling you, despite my good intentions." Julie ran a hand through her tousled blonde locks. "Don't get me wrong, I enjoy being with you, Gill."

"But you want your marriage back to how it was."

"Exactly."

"I'm not offended, not in the least. We both know I'm not looking for a relationship and you are just looking for something you aren't getting at the moment."

Julie sighed, "Yeah."

"So what is it that you're not getting?"

"Don't get me wrong, Neil was a great guy when I married him and an attentive lover, but lately, there just doesn't seem to be the same level of interest. We take each other for granted and have forgotten to put in the effort, or maybe he just doesn't want to make the effort any more. Hell I don't know. I do know there have been other women."

"Just ask him for whatever it is you want and need."

Julie laughed without humour. "You make it sound so simple."

"Sometimes it is."

Julie looked at Gill with nothing but fondness.

"What?"

"You know, you have all these great qualities, that a lot of people don't get to see. You're selfless and generous and when you do decide to settle down, I think you will make someone a really good partner."

Gill shook her head, "Nonsense, I won't be settling down anytime soon. Too many beautiful women on the planet."

"That's what attracts me to you, you're so carefree."

Gillian pulled Julie closer to her and idly nuzzled one of her breasts. "Mmm, I do love these." She let the nipple pop from her mouth, "So, are you going to talk to Neil?" She resumed her mouth's caress, this time moving languidly down Julie's flat, toned stomach.

Julie's hand moved into her hair, "Mmm, yeah, but right now I can only concentrate on what you're doing." And Gill continued her ministrations, slowly but surely until she was nudging Julie's thighs apart and feasting upon her centre.

Friday evening found Gill visiting her two favourite people, as she did almost every Friday. "Where is my dinner, woman?"

"You're lucky I even cooked for you and now you're making demands?"

Gill sat at the dining table with Charlotte, cutlery in hand waiting. "We're hungry. Aren't you hungry, Charlie?"

The four year old nodded, "Yes!"

"We want dinner! We want dinner!" Charlotte joined in the chant and banged her cutlery on the table, much to Justine's frustration.

"Charlotte, stop banging your cutlery and, Gillian...grow up!"

Gill and Charlotte laughed at their antics, giving each other a high five. "Seriously, Justine, what can I help with?"

"Really, I insist you remain in your seat, I don't know how, but something always happens when you try and help with the food."

Gill had a brief flashback to the curry she helped with. It had ended up tasting like chicken with sugar on it and that was only one of many disasters. She had to concede that Justine did have a point, "I insist on doing all the washing up then."

"Trust me, I won't be stopping you." Justine replied as she strained the spaghetti.

"So, Charlotte, you got a boyfriend yet?"

The little girl giggled at the question Gillian always asked her. "Noooooooooo."

"Has Mummy got a boyfriend yet?"

"Yes."

"What!" Gill exclaimed as she stared at Justine. She had expected the same 'no' that she always got. Little Charlotte sat looking wide-eyed wondering what she had said.

Justine turned from the hob where she had been stirring the meatballs. "I don't have a boyfriend."

"Well that's not what Charlotte says." Gill looked at Charlotte who was still wide-eyed.

"I've been on a date." Justine began plating the spaghetti and adding the meatballs while Gill and Charlie stared at her. She served Gill. "You'll get yours in a minute, Charlotte, they need to cool down a little bit more."

"Okay, mummy."

"His name is Kenny, we have been on one date."

Gill's eyes narrowed, "And when were you going to tell me this?"

"Tonight after dinner." Justine looked pointedly at Charlotte, her inference clear.

"Great, we can chat after dinner. Eat up, Charlie, you're having an early night."

"Okay, Gilly," the little girl answered innocently, causing Gill and Justine to smile.

Chapter 4

Emma Hughes unlocked her bicycle from the railings at the back of her new flat, then walked down the iron staircase, carrying the bike over her shoulder. It was odd to be walking on the flat roof of the shops below, but Edinburgh's Old Town was full of quirks like that due to the undulating character of the city. Placing her water bottle into its cage and fastening her helmet, Emma checked the security of her rucksack before popping one foot into a toe-clip and pushing off with her free foot. Once the second foot was secure, she began her five-mile cycle to the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary and the new job she would be starting that morning.

Having been in the city for only four days, Emma had made a test run of the route yesterday and discovered that it was pretty much straight all the way out to the hospital. There was a slow incline, but that just meant that cycling home after work would be easier. Twenty minutes later, Emma was securing her bicycle in one of the allotted spaces. Removing her water bottle, she made her way to the Occupational Therapy department, where she would shower and change into her uniform, before starting her new job as a senior Occupational Therapist in orthopaedics.

After being allocated a locker within the changing rooms, Emma carefully hung up her tunics for

the week, along with three pairs of trousers. She selected one of the neatly pressed white tunics, with a bottle green trim on the short sleeves and v-neck collar, and slipped it over her shoulders, doing up the buttons before smoothing her palms over the front of the tunic, removing any creases. Emma then selected one of the pairs of bottle green, cargo style trousers with a sewn down crease. Pulling them on, she zipped and buttoned them before slipping her feet into a pair of snow-white training shoes. Finally she pulled her hair back into a ponytail and fastened her ID badge to her tunic pocket. She was ready for the day ahead.

Emma spent the rest of the morning being shown around by the head of the Occupational Therapy department, Susan Munro, and meeting her fellow OT's along with the Physiotherapists who worked on the orthopaedic wards. She was then introduced to the orthopaedic nursing staff and the team of doctors. Emma took in as much information as she could, knowing the more technical details were in her induction pack. As of tomorrow, Emma would be working independently with her team of six orthopaedic OT's. The only person she was answerable to was her boss, Susan Munro. Other than that, she had complete professional autonomy. Emma was very much looking forward to the challenges this new promotion would bring her way.

After a quiet lunch, that gave Emma some time to relax and process some of the vast amount of information she had been bombarded with, Emma had an afternoon to spend in the OT department, familiarising herself with its workings. As she sat at the desk that was to be her working space, she was aware of one of her Senior Two's involved in a telephone call that didn't seem to be going well.

"Problem?" asked Susan Munro, the head OT. Until Emma was fully up to speed, Susan was overseeing the orthopaedic department.

"I just got off the phone to a community OT," the Senior Two replied. "I have a patient who requires a discharge home visit but he lives in Dumfries, over eighty miles away. If I do the discharge home visit, it's going to mean me and a patient transport ambulance, with two staff tied in, for an entire day. So, I called the community OT, who has been dealing with the gentleman prior to his surgery, to ask if she would do the discharge home visit for us. She refused, saying he is my patient until I fully discharge him." The OT shook her head, "That means I will have to go on a hundred and sixty mile round trip that will take up my entire day, to do a home visit that would take her all of an hour! Talk about being unhelpful."

Susan Munro mulled over the problem facing the Senior Two. "Hmm, while she is technically correct, most community OT's would do us the favour, recognising the time and cost we will incur. Not forgetting we are already a Senior Two down, and have two new OT's, fresh out of college, needing to be taught and looked after. We can't really spare you for an entire day."

Emma watched the exchange knowing that this would be her problem to deal with, as early as next week. She felt that there was no time like the present to get her feet wet. "May I call her back?" She asked.

The head OT and Senior Two looked at her, Susan Munro making the decision. "I don't see why not, this is your department after all."

"Thank you." Emma took all the details from her Senior Two. After familiarising herself with all the facts, she then made the call, with the others, whilst looking busy with their own work, undoubtedly listening in.

"Hello, may I speak with Muriel Wilson, please?"

"Speaking."

"Good afternoon, Muriel, my name is Emma Hughes, head orthopaedic OT, at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary."

"I spoke with your senior two just a short time ago regarding Mr. Denholm. Are you calling in regards to this patient?"

"I am indeed."

"As I said to the other OT, we won't take him over as a patient until he is fully discharged from the hospital."

"I understand, Muriel, but it's my first day and I just wanted to check a couple of details with you." Emma waited a beat allowing the community OT to relax a little. "Am I right in saying that, while we do the discharge, any equipment that Mr. Denholm requires will be coming out of your budget and not ours?"

"Yes, that's correct, Emma."

"Hmm, well I'm afraid it looks like Mr. Denholm will be requiring rather a lot of items to assist him with his daily needs. He will be living alone, after all, and we don't know his location or whether he may have any helpful neighbours living nearby. This is a pity, as I'm sure that information would have helped us to cut down the costs. Unfortunately, our lack of knowledge, in this instance will mean we will have to err on the side of caution. I'm sure you can understand our predicament." Emma had heard a sharp intake of breath coming from somewhere in the room behind her. There was a long silence on the other end of the telephone, which Emma waited out.

Finally, Emma heard a throat being cleared on the other end of the line. *"I ah, actually have a free afternoon on Friday. Could the patient be discharged then?"*

Emma scribbled down a note on a pad and indicated with her eyes for her Senior Two to read it. After receiving an affirmative nod, Emma continued. "I'm certain that can be arranged. I'll have my Senior Two call you back to confirm the details. Have a lovely afternoon and thank you for your help."

Replacing the receiver, Emma was suddenly aware that all eyes were upon her. Knowing the only ones that mattered were those of her boss, she looked directly at Susan Munro, but could read nothing from her. She instead turned to her Senior Two. "She has agreed to do the discharge

home visit on Friday afternoon, can you arrange the patient transport for then?"

The senior two nodded, "I don't foresee any problems with that. I'll get right on it and call the community OT back with the details." The senior two left to finalise the details for the patient, leaving Emma alone with her boss.

"Well that was a unique way of dealing with the problem," her boss remarked.

Emma knew to tread carefully. "Do you disapprove?"

"Ordinarily, yes, but when someone is being deliberately difficult, I have been known to have a change of heart."

"And is that the case this time?" Emma asked with deliberate caution.

Susan nodded, "Yes." Her boss winked at Emma, "I think you're going to fit in just fine."

"Thank you."

Senior orthopaedic registrar Hilary Duffy walked into the Doctor's staff room. She had been on her feet for the last twelve hours and was looking forward to a shower and change of clothing. She looked across the staff room, seeing one of her colleagues with his feet up on the table as he slouched in one of the low, comfortable chairs.

"Have you heard about our new OT?"

Hilary paused, coffee pot in hand, to favour him with a dubious look. "I met her this morning at the same time as you." She poured the coffee into a mug, then took a seat opposite him.

"Yes, but did you hear about her threatening to blow a community OT's budget on one patient if they didn't do as she asked?"

Hilary raised an eyebrow. "Impressive."

David Menzies sat forward, clearly warming to the subject at hand. "Rumour has it Penelope crossed herself before fainting."

Hilary snorted, almost spitting out her mouthful of coffee at the image of the very religious occupational therapist doing just what David had described. "Stop. While I don't doubt that she may have disapproved, I suspect someone is exaggerating." Hilary continued laughing at the image, true or not, it was funny. "Looks like our new OT might shake a few things up around here, certainly wouldn't be a bad thing."

"Definitely not, and... she can blow my budget anytime, she's hot."

"Such a pig."

David laughed, "By the way, I also hear she is looking for a hockey club to join and, having spoken to a reliable source of mine in Dublin, I'm told that she's apparently very handy with a stick. Better snap her up fast, Hilary."

She didn't miss his double meaning, shaking her head at his antics.

"What?" said David, "A new start over here, most likely still single after her bad break up." He shrugged, "Easy pickings."

"You don't know any of that to be true."

"Like I said, a reliable source in Dublin."

Hilary pursed her lips. "I'm not so desperate that I need to pick up a woman who may be vulnerable and on the rebound, but still, the hockey part sounds promising. I'll have a chat with her about that."

David leaned back in his chair as he remarked casually, "Better be quick, Murray is eyeing her up."

Hilary frowned. "Murray is gay and wouldn't know a hockey stick from a walking stick."

"Yes, but he's looking for an NBF."

"What the hell is that?"

David did a perfect impersonation of the staff nurse as he answered. "A new best friend, darling."

Hilary sighed, "This place is getting stranger by the day."

Chapter 5

Gillian made her way down the sports centre steps to the Astroturf pitch. She really did enjoy her Wednesday evening summer hockey matches, despite the obvious hazards Julie had pointed out. It was a balmy Edinburgh evening and it would make a nice change playing hockey in the pleasant temperature.

"Hey, Nigel, who are we playing tonight?"

"Oh, Gillian, Hi. I wondered if you would make it after limping off last week."

"Yeah, about that. The physio says I can play, but I'm not allowed to sprint."

Nigel nodded, "You want to play further back then?"

"I'll start at centre midfield, see how that goes."

"Great! It's the Royal Infirmary tonight."

Gill glanced towards the goal to her left, looking for a familiar face. She saw the opposition warming up and laughed at the amount of tubigrip and physio tape on display. It was truly amazing what some people needed when it was available for free. She spotted the tall buxom form of Hilary Duffy, her shock of thick black hair in a ponytail. She was hitting the ball to a blonde Gillian didn't recognise, but instantly appraised. Blonde, tall and tanned. Very nice. Gill removed one of her sticks from her bag; deliberately selecting a slightly heavier model than she normally used. The Royal Infirmary were renowned for their *robust* play. Gill remembered calling them a bunch of hackers to Hilary after last summer's game, Hilary claimed they were simply robust. Shinguards firmly in place, Gill slipped on her left protective glove and tucked her gum-shield into the waistband of her skirt.

After the warm-up the game got underway. Hilary didn't take long to notice that Gill was carrying an injury and was intent on pushing home her advantage and unexpected superior pace at every opportunity. As the pair moved towards a loose ball, Hilary got there first, taunting Gillian as she moved easily past her. "Come on, slowcoach!"

This was war for Gillian, the words spurring her on into some kind of reprisal. When she collected the ball in the centre she deliberately drove straight at Hilary, easily beating her with an outrageous piece of skill, then allowed Hilary to recover, before simply slipping the ball between her legs for a slide rule pass to one of the strikers. "That's what they call a nutmeg, Duffy."

The game continued in this vein, with the erstwhile teammates foes on this occasion. The verbal sledging going on between the pair was beginning to elicit laughter from the other players on the pitch. Emma wasn't sure what was going on with the normally efficient and competent Speciality Registrar that she saw at work each morning. Hilary Duffy had invited Emma along to play for the hospital team and also spoken to her about joining her club, Dunedin ladies. Now she was seeing a whole new side to the doctor.

"No wonder the NHS is in financial difficulties, your players are wearing half the stock."

"If you had any pace, Gillian Rae, you would be a half decent hockey player."

Emma thought that to be an understatement. If the opposition player had pace, she would be frighteningly good. She had already scored two penalty corners from five attempts, a fantastic

ratio in anyone's book.

The game finally descended into outright comedy midway through the second half when Gillian jumped onto Hilary's back as she ran past her with the ball. "Get off me, you lunatic!" Hilary was desperately trying to dislodge Gillian, but Gill was hanging on for dear life.

"I thought that since I was so slow, I would hitch a ride."

"I'm not a taxi. Get off me, Gillian!"

Gill refused to let go and instead whispered in Hilary's ear, "That's not what you said the last time we were this close."

"You wish, Rae!"

A long, sharp blow on the umpire's whistle finally restored some parity to the situation. Calling both players over the umpire issued a lecture to them. "I'm not sure what to call that particular infringement, Rae, but I'm giving you a green card for unsporting conduct. I don't think the umpire's handbook has even thought to include such an incident."

Gill protested while trying to keep a straight face, "I was hardly being unfriendly."

Hilary also had something to say. "It was unwarranted attention and I think a green card is too lenient."

"I'm the umpire, not you, Duffy. One more word and you're joining her."

Hilary pointed to herself. "Me!"

"That does it." The umpire brandished the green card at Hilary as well. "That's for too much lip and that *is* in the handbook. Now, the pair of you, behave. No more frolicking or flirting, whichever it is you are doing, or it's the yellow card next time and I don't think either of you wants that?"

"No, umpire," they answered in unison with their heads slightly bowed in shame.

"I've been umpiring the pair of you for years and never witnessed anything like it." The mirth was clearly showing on the umpire's face. "Now shake hands and get on with it."

They did as asked and the rest of the game passed without further incident, Gill's side running out 4 -2 winners.

"Well played, Hilary, though I have to say, on this occasion, I didn't enjoy watching your backside as you easily ran away from me." She shook the doctor's hand.

"Thanks, Gill, you played not too badly yourself. Still beat us, even with a dodgy leg. Are you

going for a drink?"

"I can't, Hilary, I'm babysitting."

Hilary laughed thinking Gill was kidding around until a cute little red haired child ran up to them as they walked towards the side of the pitch.

"Gilly! Gilly!"

"Hey, Charlie." Gill bent and caught the little girl as she flung her arms around her, easily lifting her up. "You looking forward to hanging out with me?"

"Yup!" she answered excitedly as Gillian ruffled her mass of red curls.

Hilary looked shocked. "Well I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

"Hilary, this is Charlotte, my friend Justine's daughter. Charlotte say hello to Hilary?"

"Hello, Charlotte," Hilary boomed as she stood over the little girl. Charlotte buried her face in Gill's neck.

"Thank goodness you didn't choose a career in paediatrics." Gill laughed, before whispering to Charlotte, "Say hello to Doctor Hilary, she's really scared of children so she needs your help."

Charlotte nodded, then popped her head up from Gill's shoulder. "Hello," she said before holding out a little hand for Hilary to shake. Hilary's hand dwarfed Charlotte's and the truth was, Hilary really wasn't great with kids, they were just too small for her liking.

"Hello," Hilary whispered, "I play hockey with Gillian."

"Gilly is cool."

"Oh, I see you have her well trained, Gillian."

"No, Charlotte is just a good judge of character."

Hilary laughed, "She is cute as a button."

Gill couldn't agree more. "We have to get going, I'll see you soon, Hilary."

"Bye, Gill, bye, Charlotte."

The little girl waved over Gillian's shoulder and Hilary's heart melted.

Gill walked over to Justine and put Charlotte down. "I'll just get my bags and we can go." Jogging over to where her kit and stick bags were, she packed her stick away, then shouldered

both bags and jogged back over to where Justine and Charlotte were waiting. "I'm starving and I haven't had any dinner yet, is it alright if we stop at -"

Justine cut her off before she could finish her sentence. "Don't you dare say it," she warned.

Gill pouted, "But I'm starving and you know I can't cook," she pleaded.

"That's why I made you a vegetable lasagne. There is also some mixed salad and garlic bread. Charlotte will eat some if she is hungry, but I wouldn't imagine she will have very much as we already ate. She might enjoy some fruit salad though."

"Oh, Justine you are the best!" Gill deposited a kiss on her lips.

"I trust you to feed Charlotte properly tomorrow," Justine cautioned.

"Don't worry about tomorrow, Margaret is doing the food."

Justine let out a relieved breath at hearing the name of Gill's older sister. "Thank goodness," she said before the three of them walked to the car park.

Emma had taken in the entire scene from her place over by the doors. She watched as the player Hilary had battled with all game walked over to a blonde before turning to pick up her bags. As she shouldered her bags, she spoke briefly to the blonde before planting a kiss on her lips. Then the two women walked off, with the little girl in the middle holding each of their hands. She thought they looked like a loving family unit and it gave her such a sense of longing she felt momentarily overwhelmed. Hilary interrupted her musings.

"That's Gillian Rae, she plays for Dunedin ladies."

Emma nodded, and realised the news that she would see more of the young woman pleased her. "I hope she strikes the penalty corners for the team."

"She does and I honestly don't think there is anyone better at it in the ladies' game."

"She's the best I've seen. Shame about her lack of pace though."

Hilary laughed, "Yeah, she was a bit slow. We're going to the pub across the road for a drink, are you up for it?"

Emma relished the chance to meet people and socialise. Her biggest problem since arriving in Edinburgh was that she hardly knew a soul. "Sounds great."

The following evening Gill returned Charlotte to her mother after a day of fun and adventure.

"Mummy! Mummy!" The excited little redhead ran into her mother's waiting arms.

"Oof, someone is pleased to see me." Justine kissed Charlotte on the forehead. "Did you have a good day?"

"U-huh."

"What did you do?"

"Played with Dale." Gill answered quickly, but Charlotte was more descriptive.

"We kissed!"

Justine turned to favour Gill with a stern look. "Why is it not a surprise that my daughter has her first kiss when she is out with you!"

Gill burst out laughing. "What can I say, Dale is following in his auntie's footsteps."

"Dale is in big trouble." Justine said with mock seriousness, then she frowned as she looked more closely at her daughter. "Where are my daughter's clothes?"

"She's wearing them."

"Gillian, I'm a mother, I know what clothes my daughter owns, and none of these are hers."

"We went shopping, I bought those from Gap Kids, aren't they cute?"

"You went shopping?" Justine repeated and Gill nodded. "So where are the clothes that I packed for Charlotte to wear today?"

"Inthebin."

"Sorry? Did you just say in the bin?"

Gill scratched the back of her neck, "Eh, yes."

"You are going to explain to me, in minute detail, exactly what happened."

Gill rolled her eyes. "Well we spent the day at Margaret's because she invited us and I wanted to catch up with my sister. Obviously, with Dale being there and the two of them are of a similar age, Charlotte and Dale played a lot together."

"Yes, that much I have already gathered and Dale is six years old."

"Well anyway, Charlotte was playing on Dale's little trike, they found it in the kid's shed. At

some point the chain must have come off and, instead of running helplessly to the nearest adult, little Miss Independent attempted to put the chain back on herself."

"Oh, dear."

Gill nodded, "Is the Bluetooth switched on on your laptop?"

"Yes,"

Gill sent a picture she had taken on her mobile phone of Charlotte when she found her trying to put the chain back on the trike. The little girl had oil all over the front of her brightly coloured t-shirt and on her little denim jeans and trainers. "She looks like an adorable little ragamuffin." Justine remarked.

"I know. I love the picture. I'm going to get it printed and framed."

Justine smiled at the pair of them. "Well that explains the new clothing but, Gill, you didn't have to buy her new clothes, really."

"I know, but I wanted to, and Gap Kids is just too cute. I wanted to get lots more."

"Well, thank you, the outfit is gorgeous, but next time..."

"What?"

"Take the labels off."

"Oh." Gill laughed, "When do I get all the juicy details of last night's date?"

"You will have to wait until after Charlotte's bedtime for those kind of details. I trust you are staying for dinner?"

"Most definitely. I can't wait to hear all about it."

"After dinner then, for now you and Charlotte can tell me all about your day together and don't think I have forgotten her first kiss!"

Chapter 6

Gill reached out blindly for her mobile phone, desperate to stop the racket. Using one hand to hold open an eye, she located the correct button and, with the other, she answered.

"Hello?" she croaked.

"Morning, sunshine, it's a beautiful day and they are setting up two nets down on Portobello beach, are you up for it?"

Gill sank back into her mattress. "What time is it?"

"Eight."

"Justine! It's Saturday morning." Gill complained.

"Do you have someone with you? Tell them you need to be somewhere."

Gill managed to fully open one eye and peer to her left. She was the only occupant of the bed, and was yet to remember what she had been doing the previous evening. "I'm alone."

"Good, that makes things easier. It's a ten o'clock start at the King Street end of the beach."

"Justine, I don't know, I would like to sleep in today." Her head hurt and she still didn't know what she had been doing the night before.

"That's a pity, it's a mixed tournament and Kenny and his friend Dave were going to partner us."

Gillian sat up quickly, which instantly caused more pain. "Wait! Just wait a minute. You wouldn't be making that up?"

"Absolute truth, Guides honour, if you turn up you will meet Kenny."

"Okay, I'll be there."

"Don't you go back to sleep, Gillian." Justine cautioned.

Gill yawned, "I promise I will be there." Ending the call, Gill leaned back on her pillow. *'What on earth was I doing last night?'* She groaned as she started to remember. An Indian restaurant with the mixed hockey team, then a couple of bars and after that they had all ended up back at Nigel's house drinking tequila sunrises. Gill could still taste them on her tongue and she doubted she had been in bed more than four hours. Forcing herself to get up, she headed straight to the kitchen and opened her fridge, looking for fruit juice. She immediately disregarded the fresh orange and selected the apple juice, drinking it straight from the carton. Opening a tube of ready salted Pringle's, she started to eat them as she repeated her mantra, *'sugar and salt, sugar and salt'*. She knew that if her stomach didn't rebel against them she would be fine. After showering, Gill popped two paracetamol and decided things weren't as bad as she had first feared. Until, that was, she opened the blinds and squinted into the bright sunlight. Returning to bed suddenly seemed very tempting, but she had promised Justine and she really did want to meet Kenny.

Having first put on a dark bikini, Gill then selected shorts and a tank top to put over it. Choosing a grey hoodie and a pair of Oakley sunglasses, she slid her feet into a pair of flip flops, then filled a small rucksack with shower gel, shampoo, a towel and lots of suncream. Picking up her purse, phone and car keys from the dresser, she was all set for a day of beach volleyball.

Parking a short distance away from the beach, Gill walked towards the promenade. It was getting busy, but she had no problem spotting the volleyball nets that were already seeing good use with a few players warming up on either side. Through her shades Gill glanced up and saw nothing but blue sky. It was going to be a scorcher.

"Morning, Gillian."

Gill turned to see who was greeting her so cheerily. Her frown instantly turning into a smile at the sight of Justine's mum. "Hi, Pauline." She waited on the older woman to catch her up.

"You remember Brian?" Pauline asked as she introduced her husband of six months.

"Absolutely, I really enjoyed your wedding." Gill briefly recalled that fateful day at school when they found out that Justine's father had died of a massive heart attack. Having survived two previously, the third one was just too much. They were only fifteen when it happened. It had taken Pauline a long time to get over the loss of her husband, but she had finally started living her life again and she knew that Brian had been a big part of that. Despite her mum's concerns, Justine had approved wholeheartedly of Pauline's relationship with the kind, handsome man.

"Nice to see you again, Gillian."

"I take it you're heading down to watch the volleyball and enjoy a day at the beach with Justine and Charlotte?"

Pauline had the good grace to blush a little. "Well, we will get to meet Kenny at last. I shouldn't be so nosey, but I want to see the guy that has managed to get my daughter to agree to more than one date."

"Me too, I was all but refusing to play today until she mentioned he would be here." The women shared a giggle, while Brian smiled and shook his head. "Let's go and find the girls."

"Grandma! Gilly!" The ever exuberant Charlotte came running over the sand to greet them. Justine followed a little way behind, walking towards them accompanied by a tall, dark haired man. A little slim, Gill thought, but volleyball players tended to be lean.

"Hi, Mum, Brian, Gillian, this is Kenny." Justine looked a little embarrassed, but Gill knew it wasn't anything to do with the guy, she just always felt uncomfortable in these situations. Deep down she was a very private person.

Gill waited until Pauline and Brian had said their hello's before she spoke. "Hi, Kenny, really nice to meet you." She shook his hand. Instantly taken with his easy smile.

"Hi, Gillian, I've heard a lot about you, I feel like I already know you."

"I hope it wasn't all bad."

He grinned again, "No, Justine has almost only good things to say about you."

Gill pretended to be surprised. "Really?"

Justine intervened, "You know I love you really."

"I brought my friend Dave along and he's looking for a woman to team up with for the day. Justine says hockey is your game, but you're not half bad at volleyball. Would you mind partnering with him?"

"Not at all, it should be fun."

"Thanks so much, Gillian, I'll let him know." He turned to Justine, "I'll be back in a couple of minutes. We're already down to play and it should all be starting in about quarter of an hour."

They watched as Kenny jogged towards a group of people who seemed to be organising the day's events. Gillian turned to Justine, a glint in her eye. "I never would have credited you with such good taste."

"Thanks, Gillian!" Justine swatted at her friend's arm.

"Seriously, Justine, I like him."

"Really?"

"No joke, I get good vibes from him, and I think he is really good looking."

Justine looked dubiously at her friend, "Don't mess around, Gill. I want you to say what you think, I have a terrible track record with guys and I don't exactly trust my judgement all that much."

Gill looked at her friend. She knew Justine had been reluctant to date after her failed relationship with Charlotte's father but, until now, Gill hadn't been fully aware of just how much that break up had shattered her confidence. "Seriously, Justine, I like him. I know I joke around a lot, but not with this. He seems like a genuinely nice guy, and I do think he's good looking." Gill tried to convey to her friend just how sincerely she meant it.

"Thanks, Gillian. I like him a lot, but I want to take things slowly, Charlotte comes first."

Gill hugged Justine, "I know and I'm really happy for you, I hope it works out."

"Me too."

"We'd better head down there, it looks like the games are about to start."

They spent the morning enjoying the short games of beach volleyball. Dave turned out to be a very good player and, although Gillian was short of his standard, he was content to play the game as it should be played and not dominate the ball. While Dave and Gill enjoyed a mixture of wins and losses, Kenny and Justine were reigning supreme on the taped out sandy courts. It was a joy to watch them play together.

"Gilly, will you take me to the water?"

Gill looked at Pauline who had been looking after Charlotte, and instantly took pity on the poor woman. She looked like she was ready to wilt. "Of course I will."

"Oh thanks, Gillian, she has me worn out."

"You have a sit down and enjoy the sun, Pauline, I'll take over for a while."

"Would you mind if I joined the two of you?" Dave asked.

Gill instantly started searching for what to say. She didn't want this day to turn out like some strange double date.

Dave seemed to pick up on Gill's dilemma, "It's okay, Kenny said, you know, you're not interested in guys."

Gill was relieved, that removed any awkwardness from the situation and she could simply enjoy Charlotte and Dave's company. "Charlotte, can Dave come down to the water with us?"

"Yeah!" she screamed, her little feet already scampering towards the sea.

"Looks like we better hurry up, Dave." The pair of them took off after the little imp, catching her before she did a full belly flop into the water.

Justine looked up during a short break in play as she heard the delighted squeals of her daughter carrying on the soft breeze. She laughed as she saw Charlotte and Gill chasing Dave and trying to soak him, only to have the tables turned and scurrying away to a quick retreat. It was a wonderful snapshot.

After a break for lunch, which Justine had so generously provided, Gill and Dave were the next match on. As they took their place on court number two Gill's eyes nearly popped out at the sight that greeted them on the other side of the net. She turned, slack jawed, and looked at Dave. "Who are the catwalk models?"

"The guy plays for the Jets, I'm not sure about the woman."

"Are they a couple?"

Dave laughed, "I have no idea. Do you like her?"

"Do you?"

"She's stunning."

"I think so too."

"I forget you're practically thinking the same way I am."

"Just with different parts of anatomy."

Dave burst out laughing, "You're worse than a guy!"

"Really?" Gill was doubtful.

"No." Dave conceded. "I'm just not used to hearing anything like that from a woman, or swapping notes on a woman with another woman."

"Come on, we'd better focus, I suspect this is going to be very tough." And it was. The pair on the other side of the court took the set easily, despite the best efforts of Gill and Dave. All they could do was walk up to the net and congratulate their opponents on a great game.

"Well played."

"Thank you," came the cool reply that instantly sent shivers down Gill's back.

"Oh, I love your accent, a little hint of Swedish?"

The cool blonde favoured Gill with a raised eyebrow, "Yes."

"I'm Gillian Rae."

"Maddie Anderson."

Gill smiled, "Nice to meet you, Maddie."

"And you."

"Do you play for one of the ladies teams?"

"Yes."

Gill laughed, "I like a woman of few words." She looked meaningfully at Maddie, hoping her point was taken.

"Indeed." She was favoured with the merest quirk of a smile, then it was gone as quickly as it appeared, but it was enough for Gillian to proceed.

"Will you be here for the duration, or do you have to rush off somewhere?"

"That depends?"

Well it wasn't exactly a brush off, so Gill forged ahead. "I'd really like to continue this one sided conversation a little later?"

"Where?"

"My place, around eightish?"

Maddie Anderson gave a faint nod of agreement. "I'll need your address."

Gill remained cool, but inside she was doing cartwheels. She told Maddie her address and then watched as the woman strode purposefully off without so much as a backwards glance. Gill walked back over to where her friends had set up camp.

"What were you saying to Maddie Anderson?" Justine enquired.

"Oh, you know her?"

"Vaguely, I've played against her a good few times, never gotten to know her though. She's colder than the corpses she sees."

Gill looked horrified. "Eww, what does she do, cut them up?"

"No, she's in the Police, part of the murder squad."

"It suits her, she gives me tingles."

Justine frowned, "Please tell me you don't want to sleep with her?"

"I think it's already a done deal, she's agreed to come to my place tonight."

Dave almost choked on his drink at hearing that.

"Good luck with that, Gillian, she's cold."

"I know and I'm looking forward to melting her."

Justine shook her head at her friend's glee. Gill loved the thrill of the chase and was confident enough to go after what she wanted. She looked at Dave, who seemed to be lost in his own little daydream, probably thinking of Gill and Maddie together, he was practically drooling, poor guy.

Gill spent the rest of the afternoon playing some volleyball, funning around with Charlotte and ogling Maddie Anderson at every available opportunity. She was really looking forward to her evening.

Chapter 7

"Why am I the one driving?"

Gill grinned at Susan Leslie as they sat in her two-seater sports car, with the top open. "Because you have several cars and I only have one."

"That is not a sensible answer."

"Sue, you offered to drive on Wednesday evening, after the game."

Gill watched as Sue frowned, then seemed to remember. "Oh, yes, I did, didn't I?"

"You can leave your car if you want to drink, I'll give you a lift to pick it up tomorrow if you like."

"Thank you, but I will probably have Alan drive me back to get it."

"Who is Alan? Have you got a man?" Gill teased.

"Goodness no, I still haven't found one who isn't after the family money. Alan is my father's driver."

"Try a woman?" Gill suggested impishly.

Sue gave Gill an imperious look, "I have, darling, it just didn't move me."

"She mustn't have been doing it right."

"Oh no, that wasn't the problem, I had some lovely orgasms, and she was such a dear. No, I'm afraid I have a preference for males."

"No need to apologise, it happens," Gill replied as she laughed at Sue's apology and the woman's straightforwardness.

"Where *is* this place?"

Gill looked down the long stretch of road on the outskirts of East Lothian. "It's almost at the very end of this street. Take a right turn before the junction, it leads to a private road."

Sue did as instructed and they soon found themselves in a secluded area, surrounded by big, mock Tudor, houses. They both turned to look at each other. "Professional footballer?" Sue asked.

"Yes, I think you will find a few of them living around here."

"Indeed."

Sue parked as close to Julie's residence as she could, then they both made their way to their teammate's house for the end of season summer barbecue. The weather was great and Gill was looking forward to relaxing and having a few drinks. The summer mixed hockey team was primarily made up of lawyers and police officers. "How did you end up playing for this team, Sue?"

"Farquar is father's lawyer."

Gill was quiet as she recalled exactly how she had come to be playing for the mixed hockey team. She groaned internally.

"Is everything alright, Gillian?"

"Yes, I was just thinking about how I ended up playing for the team."

"Oh, do tell."

They had reached the front gate of the two garaged home and Gill hoped Sue would forget all about her question. The front door was open and they walked inside, simply following the noise, which led them to the kitchen and out into a well crafted, perfectly manicured, back garden.

"Ahh, Gilly and Sue, we were just wondering where you two were." Farquar said.

"Are we the last to arrive?"

"Fashionably late, ladies."

Gill and Sue hugged Julie, their teammate and host, "What would the two of you like to drink?"

"Pimms please."

"And a cold Bud for me, thanks."

They sat amongst the gathered teammates and their partners. Gill took a sip of her cold beer straight from the bottle, enjoying the smooth taste.

"Gillian was just about to tell me how she ended up playing for our team."

Suddenly the beer wasn't going down as smoothly as it had been and Gill almost choked on it. With her eyes watering she croaked, "Maybe another time." Everyone was now interested in the story and insisted that she tell it. Gill took a few more mouthfuls of beer trying to put off the inevitable.

"Come on, Gillian, get on with it."

She held a hand up to forestall the badgering. "Alright. But please remember, I was young and impressionable."

"Oh, this should be good."

"I had just left high school and was on a night out with my school friends. We'd had a few drinks and decided to walk home. On the way home we passed some roadworks with the area sectioned off by traffic cones. I decided to borrow one and then proceeded to walk home with the cone on my head." Gill stopped and caught Nigel's eye, he was the only other person present who knew this story. "Anyway, after about ten minutes of walking this way in my inebriated state, I was vaguely aware of a flashing blue light and being told to stop. I was so drunk I didn't even consider that the problem might be the traffic cone on my head." There were a few giggles and laughs as Gill told that part. "A policeman walked up to me while his colleague remained in the car and he asked me if I was aware that it was illegal to remove a traffic cone? I said I wasn't." More laughter ensued. "He then ever so officiously, asked me my name, my address and what I did for a living. I told him I had just left high school and was about to start university. This prompted him to demand to know my date of birth as well. Turns out that, not only was I unaware that I could not go around removing traffic cones, I was also not supposed to go drinking in bars until I was eighteen." There was a lot more laughter. "I thought he was splitting hairs as I was in my eighteenth year, though admittedly a few months short of my birthday. He asked me what I had intended to do with the traffic cone when I got home. I told him I intended to add it to the pile I had already gathered in my parents' back garden. This clearly was not a good answer as I suddenly found myself in the back of the police car with my friends watching on in horror. I told them not to worry as it would save me the cost of the taxi fare, which I didn't have anyway due to spending all my pocket money in the pub."

Gillian stopped to take another drink from her rapidly disappearing beer, and without asking, another was placed beside her. "Thank you." She smiled and looked around, noting that she had everyone's attention. "I was given a lift home to my parents' house where, sure enough, a very unimpressed policeman found my stack of traffic cones by the back wall of the garden. By this

time my mum and dad had woken up and joined us wearing their matching dressing gowns. They were wondering what all the fuss was about and couldn't understand the policeman's problem at all. To quote my mum *'It keeps her happy and off the streets.'* You should have seen the officer's face until my mum clarified that I used the cones to practice my hockey dribbling. And that is when the evening took an entirely different twist. The police officer asked me who I played for but, of course, at that time in my life, I had no team. I had just left school. He said he was playing in a mixed hockey tournament the following day and they were short of players. If I played, he would overlook the road traffic offences I had committed. He also gave my mum a guarantee that he would pick me up in the morning and bring me back home safely in the evening. I agreed straight away, as did my mum. He then took away my pile of traffic cones, which I wasn't very impressed about, and told me to go to a sports shop and get the official ones. I've been playing for the summer hockey team ever since."

Gill finished and everyone was quiet for a moment, until they realised she wasn't saying any more.

"Oh come on, Gill, you can't leave us hanging, who was the officer?"

"I'll never tell."

Gill was tickled mercilessly until she screamed out Nigel's name.

"PC Innes, I'm impressed with your particular brand of justice." Farquar stated.

"Here, here."

"Thank you M'lud." Nigel joked.

As the day wore on and the drink flowed liberally, there was a lot of hi jinx and teasing going on in the hot afternoon sun. Gill decided to get some more food to soak up some of the alcohol she had been so freely indulging in. She had lost count of how many buds she had drunk.

"Can I get you another drink, it's a really hot day?"

Gill turned to look at Julie's husband Neil, who she had met a couple of times before. "Sure, a cold bud would be great."

He returned with her drink and she was aware of him looking at her double tank top covered breasts. Then she saw his eyes move downwards to where her shorts ended mid-thigh and then along her tanned legs to her flip-flops. Gill felt strangely exposed by the blatant way he checked her out. She took the drink from him as he grinned at her. "Thanks."

"My pleasure."

Gill nodded as she sat down and took a bite of her hamburger.

"I've seen you play a few times, you're very good. I didn't know you were charming and funny as well as talented and pretty."

"Uh, thank you. I hear you were a very good footballer."

"Had to retire early from the game with a knee injury."

"That must have been difficult."

"It was at the time, I'm youth team coach now, I hope to move into management when the time is right."

Gill was aware of Neil invading her personal space and she was becoming more and more uncomfortable with the situation.

"Relax, no one's paying any attention, they're all too drunk." He stroked her bare arm with a finger.

Gill glanced over and caught the eye of his wife, Julie. The blonde simply stared over at them. She swallowed her food and took another drink of her beer.

"How about you and I get together later in the week." Neil Reid was leaning in closer and Gill's eyes never left his wife's. Neil's meaning was clear, he wanted to have sex with her and she in turn was supposed to be flattered. She finally looked away from Julie to speak directly to him. "I'm sorry, but I don't think that would be a good idea." She glanced back over to Julie then back at him.

"Oh, don't worry about Julie, she is used to my extra curricular activities." He grinned.

"Does that mean she can indulge in her own?"

He frowned, "She isn't interested in other men."

"Me neither, you see, I would be more interested in your wife than you."

Neil's face suddenly turned to stone. "Do you think that's funny?"

"No more funny than you trying to chat me up whilst she is sitting over there in your back garden surrounded, by her teammates."

"Fucking dyke." He whispered harshly before storming off.

Gill sat back and sipped her beer as she whispered under her own breath, "Yeah, and I shagged your wife." as she watched him go into his house.

Julie came over to join Gill after her husband left. She sat down next to her friend and sipped her

fruit juice. "What was Neil saying?"

"Nothing much."

"Was he asking about, you know?"

Gill turned to look at Julie, "Trust me he doesn't suspect a thing."

Julie looked worried, "How can you be sure?"

"Because he was hitting on me."

"Well at least he is being true to form. He didn't look very happy when he left?"

"No, I turned him down by informing him I had no interest in other men, just like his wife, and I said that if you were allowed the same extra curricular activities that he was, I would be interested in you. He was pissed at that."

"Christ, Gillian."

"I know, but he won't actually think anything has been going on, he believes you are a dutiful wife who quietly puts up with his affairs."

"Well I was until recently."

"I know and I also know it's over." Gill had known that when Julie pulled out of the trip to Tunisia.

"No hard feelings?"

"Of course not, I had a really good time."

"Me too."

"Come on let's mingle before rumours start flying around about a threesome."

Julie laughed as the pair made their way back to the main group, her husband nowhere to be seen. That evening, as people started to leave, Gill found herself amongst the last of the stragglers, not by accident.

"Any chance of a cup of tea?"

Julie smiled as she saw Gill standing in the doorway of her kitchen. "I wondered if you had already left?"

"No, still here. Everyone else has gone,"

"Neil's gone too, I don't know where."

"I know."

Julie put the kettle on and prepared the teapot and cups. Gill thought she looked sad.

"I had a lovely time and I know I'm a bit drunk, so I'm going to call a cab now just in case I change my mind about earlier and make a pass at you."

Julie smiled as Gill looked up the cab company on her phone. She watched as the younger woman squinted to see the correct number and she knew if Gill made a pass at her, she wouldn't say no. She poured the tea and sat opposite her at the table.

"Five minutes they said." Gill was leaning on the table, her head resting in her hand as she sipped her hot tea. "Don't look so sad."

Julie was about to protest, but thought better of it. "It's not what you think."

"Hmm, maybe."

"What do you think you know, Gillian Rae?"

"That you're pregnant and your husband's an ass."

"Good, God, what are you, psychic?"

"Nope. Anyone can see he is an ass and you have been drinking juice and water all day."

Julie nodded, "I am pregnant and I haven't told Neil yet."

Gill lightened the mood, "Don't be coming after me for child support!"

Julie laughed, "You're good, but even you are not *that* talented, Gill."

The doorbell rang, interrupting the pair. "That will be my taxi." Gill stood up and smiled at Julie, "Congratulations, I hope the baby makes all the difference to your relationship." she hugged her friend.

"Thanks, Gill, I hope so too."

They connected once more, their eyes conveying what they both wanted, but knew neither should act upon the desire. Gill took Julie's cheek in her palm and kissed her softly, the kiss deepened, but the doorbell again interrupted them. "Time for me to go. Take care of yourself."

"You too, Gillian. Night."

Chapter 8

Gill banged on the changing room doors, "Hurry up in there, girls. The bell will be ringing in less than five minutes and you're half-day today."

It was the end of the working week, and although every Friday was a half-day for the pupils, it meant staff in-service for Gillian, but she would still be out from school earlier than usual.

She checked her watch knowing the bell would go any second...

Rrrrrriiiiiinnnnng

The fourth year girls started to filter slowly out of the changing rooms. The older they got, the slower they got. The boys on the other hand were flying past her, all legs and arms and testosterone. Gillian shouted into the changing rooms to hurry them along. "Come on, girls, I want to get some lunch."

"I need to do my make-up, Miss, I can't go out without my face on."

"Me too, Miss."

"Hurry it up then." Gill stood in the corridor with the door open shouting in to the two female changing rooms.

"What you doing at the weekend, Miss?"

"Nothing this evening, just ironing and getting my kit ready for my game on Saturday."

"Honestly, Miss, you have *such* a boring life, you need to get out."

Gill smiled, "I know, what can I say."

"Have you got a boyfriend, Miss?"

"No."

"Aww, but you could, Miss, I mean you're nice looking and that. And I've seen Mr. Glaboski checking you out, and lots of the fourth year think you're hot."

Gill laughed, "You concentrate on your own love life, Miss Tonner."

"Miss, do I need to wear my tie?"

"School's over for today, Sarah, you can wear it round your head for all I care."

"Seriously, Miss, just tell us what you will be doing tonight?" Carla Tonner wasn't going to give up easily.

Gill rolled her eyes; the girls were always trying to find out details about of her life. "Okay, but just this once." She watched as they all stopped what they were doing. "After lunch, I have staff in-service. To you lot, that would mean a boring meeting. After that's over I have an appointment with the beautician to get my waxing done."

"Eww, Miss do you get everything waxed?"

"Enough! That's your lot." Gill laughed.

"Aww, Miss, you agreed."

"You girls are relentless. Okay, after my waxing, I'm going to top up my tan and a friend has invited me to dinner this evening."

"You do always have a lovely colour, Miss. I knew you used sun-beds."

"I only use them occasionally, remember they are as harmful as the sun." Gill cautioned.

"We know, Miss, especially after what happened last year."

Gill still couldn't believe some of the pupils had been booking a sun-bed in their lunch hour. It had made the national news. "Yes, so don't go getting any ideas. Now come on, out with you, I'm starving." Gill shook her head as she watched the group of girls, all gossip and lip-gloss, finally leave the PE department.

It was the start of a new season for Dunedin ladies and they had high hopes this year of a top three finish. Today wasn't a league match, the first competitive game was still two weeks away. Instead they were taking part in a tournament that would both improve match sharpness and give the captain and coach a chance to check out some new players who had joined the club and looked like promising additions to the first team squad.

Sheila Muir, the team captain, looked around and counted the players in attendance. "Right, I think that's almost everyone, we're just waiting on Scott."

"Why don't I make introductions whilst we wait for him to arrive?"

"If you do, Gillian, you will be taking the vacant position of vice-captain," Sheila cautioned.

Gill shrugged, "Okay, why not, I'll be captain of vice."

That produced a few laughs.

"We don't have a full first team squad today, there are three players unable to make it for one reason or another." Gillian looked around the players, "Let's begin by introducing the two new players here today." Gillian looked to a young woman, "Melinda, you're here to study at university, first time away from home?" The younger woman nodded. "What position do you normally play?"

"Striker."

"Excellent, we'll do our best to make you feel welcome. Everyone say hello to Melinda." Gill waited as the players greeted Melinda. "That brings us to Emma, who has joined us from Dublin Ladies. Emma is an Occupational Therapist, now I don't know exactly what that is, but I'm sure I'll find out soon."

"Stop flirting and get on with it, Gillian." Sheila said.

Gill pretended to be offended, "I would never." She then smiled winningly at Emma, before continuing. "I do apologise for the rudeness of some of my teammates. What position do you prefer, Emma?" There were a few groans of despair at Gill's joke.

Emma didn't miss the innuendo, but chose to ignore it. "Left midfield."

"Everyone, say hello to Emma." Gill waited on the greetings to stop, before continuing. "I'll introduce the squad to you both. I'm Gillian Rae, a P.E. Teacher, I usually play striker. We have two more P.E. Teachers, a popular profession." Gill pointed to each player in turn as she said their name. "Julie Reid, who plays midfield and Valerie Smith, who is a striker. Our Captain, Sheila Muir, works in sports management and plays sweeper or central defence. Next to Sheila is Laura MacDonald, also a central defender. Laura is a scientist, as is Professor Linda Wood, who plays right midfield. Hilary 'Two Gloves' Duffy, who Emma already knows, is an Orthopaedic surgeon, who plays midfield. Next to Hilary is Camilla 'Cammo' Cameron, a midfield dynamo. Moving on we have Sharon Flynn, an Art teacher who plays left defence. Jane Dodds, a right defender and corporate shark. Fay Williams, a banking striker and Karen Crawford, a midfielder who works in insurance" Gill whispered, "She's very quiet. Finally, we have Lindy Paterson, a student and our goalkeeper. The missing players are Sarah Mathieson, a policewoman who is on duty today and Susan Leslie who is probably sunning herself on some exotic island that she owns."

There was some added laughter at the last comment. "What? It's probably true." Gillian protested. "She has a Bentley."

"Oh, thank God, Scott is here." Hilary said with relief. "We don't have to listen to any more of your hyperbole, Gill."

"It's charm, you should try it."

Emma wondered if the two women ever stopped ribbing each other, it was all she had seen them do so far. She had to admit, Gillian Rae did have a certain charm to her, but she was a flirt, a quality Emma always found off putting in a person.

Julie Reid asked everyone for a few moments of their time. Gill knew what was coming. "I want to let you all know that I'm not going to be playing this season as I'm pregnant. Today is my last game for a while."

The team simultaneously began congratulating Julie and wishing her all the best.

Scott arranged the team selection for the first game, which didn't include Gillian or Sheila. "Since you are now vice captain, you can have some input into the team. Laura and Sharon are carrying injuries, so they won't feature today. They can do some jogging and gentle hitting, but we won't play them. We will start with Val and young Melinda up front. See how they do as a partnership. You and Fay can go on second half, Gill."

Gill nodded and quickly did the sums. If Melinda made the squad then one of the other three strikers would have to be dropped, that meant either herself, Fay or Valerie. She already knew Val was the weakest of the three and, with a possible say in future selection, she hoped fairness would prevail.

At half-time Dunedin were one nil down, but Emma Hughes had already impressed with her skill. Sheila, Fay and Gillian replaced Val, Melinda and Hilary for the second half and, after a short corner routine, Dunedin pulled a goal back, ending the game all square. As the short games came and went throughout the day, it became clear that Emma Hughes was going to make a great acquisition to the side, but a doubt remained over young Melinda. She had not, so far, managed a shot on goal, but then Gillian felt the youngster hadn't really been given enough time to allow her potential worth to be properly assessed. One thing was clear, Valerie wasn't doing anything to help or encourage the girl and Gill knew why. For the final match in the pool, Gill started up front with Melinda whilst Sheila remained on the sidelines with Scott to enable her to get a good look at the two of them together.

"Hey, Melinda, just relax and don't try too hard, play your usual game. I'll keep talking to you." Gillian smiled at the youngster, "We'll score a few goals," she encouraged.

Melinda looked doubtful and Gillian knew how tough it was to make the step up from school hockey to women's hockey, it could be very daunting, but she knew this girl had it. She just needed a boost to her confidence. After five minutes the game was goalless and Dunedin were facing a penalty corner against them. Gillian stood on the halfway line with Melinda.

"We need to work closer together and switch around more. You have the freedom to go wherever you like up front, don't stick to the left or right side. You play wherever you want and I will switch to the right place, don't worry." Gillian winked, "Go express yourself."

With the corner successfully defended, Dunedin broke out from their circle. Gillian screamed for the ball and Hilary slammed it hard in her direction. With the ball remaining true on the artificial turf, Gillian flattened her stick and simply let it deflect into the path of the onrushing Melinda, it left the youngster one on one with the opposition goalkeeper and she smashed a shot low past the goalie into the bottom left corner. The ball hit the backboard with a resounding thud and Melinda turned to greet her teammates with a wide smile made all the larger by her red gum shield.

Gillian high-fived the delighted youngster, it was a moment of brilliance. At half time, Val and Fay replaced Gillian and Melinda. They failed to score any more goals, but with the defence not leaking any, Dunedin held on for the win and a place in the semi-finals.

"Well what do you think?"

Sheila gave Gill's question some consideration. "Emma is a definite for the first team. I'm just not sure about Melinda."

Gill frowned, "She's a good young prospect, we should add her to the squad."

"I think she should start with the second team, then maybe we can add her to the first."

Gill shook her head. "I don't believe you, Sheila, why won't you drop her? What are you so scared off?"

"I'm not, I just think Val's experience will serve us better."

"This is wrong, Sheila, we are losing players because of her and if we don't add Melinda to our squad now, we could lose a really good young prospect. She could easily play in the second league for the University, but she has come here because she wants to play in the top league. We could have her for four years if we add her to the first team squad now. Or we could lose yet another good player because they see someone who isn't as good as them getting a game."

"She won't accept it, Gillian."

"Tough," Gill stated, "We need three strikers in the squad, we have four, Valerie is the weakest, so she should go. Why should she get to remain in the squad just because you are too scared to drop her?"

"So is Scott." Sheila protested.

"I'll drop her."

"What?"

"I'll do it. She doesn't scare me. I think this entire scenario is a complete nonsense."

"I don't know, Gill, it's difficult."

Gill shook her head and walked off.

They played the semi-final with Gill and Fay starting as the strikers and it was one all at half-time when the striking partnership swapped over. With two minutes left, Dunedin were losing two one when Melinda drove through on goal only to be fouled as she was in the act of shooting. The umpire immediately pointed to the penalty spot, awarding Dunedin a penalty stroke. Last season Cammo had been the penalty stroke taker and Gillian expected her to take this one. She was surprised when Valerie placed the ball on the spot and took up a position to flick the ball. The umpire went through the penalty flick routine, then blew the whistle to allow Val to take the flick. Gillian watched as the ball left Val's stick with no height or pace on it, allowing the keeper an easy save. She shook her head in disbelief.

When the Dunedin players left the pitch, Gill approached Camilla and asked her what happened. "Why didn't you take the penalty stroke?"

"Val said a stroke taker hadn't been decided yet for this season and she wanted to take it. When some of us protested, she simply ignored us and took the ball."

"And you let her?"

"What could I do, Gillian, push her out the way and take the flick?"

Gillian could understand what a difficult position Cammo had been put in by Val, but something would have to be sorted out. As the team sat in the changing room, there was an atmosphere amongst the players. Gillian was furious and decided to say something. "Can we assume that Camilla will again be taking the penalty flicks again for this season?"

Laura spoke up, "I thought it was a given that she would be taking them this season." She peeled her sweaty shin-guard from her sock and threw it onto the floor.

Sheila added, "I think we'll stick with the same stroke taker from last season so, Camilla, you're back on the penalty strokes."

"Like she should ever have been off them." Laura muttered, as she draped a towel over her shoulder and strode into the showers.

Val was sitting in the corner, packing her kitbag, demonstrating her obvious anger as she made a show of noisily slamming her trainers into her bag. Gillian rolled her eyes as she made her way into the showers.

"Who's got conditioner, I've forgotten mine." Gillian reached for the nearest bottle to her, which happened to belong to Linda.

"Leave it alone, Gillian, you should bring your own."

Gill squirted some into the palm of her hand. "Don't be so tight, Linda, it's only a little conditioner."

Linda grabbed the bottle from Gillian and closed the lid before returning to shampooing her hair.

Gill caught the eye of Laura and the pair quietly walked over to Linda with their shampoo bottles in hand, pouring small amounts into her hair as she attempted to rinse all the shampoo out of it. When Linda realised the task was becoming impossible she opened her eyes.

"Stop it, you two!"

Gill and Laura burst out laughing and squirted more shampoo onto Linda. "Serves you right for being so mean." Laura stated, as they continued laughing.

"Quit it!"

Laura squirted one final bit of shampoo at Linda before the pair left her to shower in peace.

"What's going on in here?" Hilary asked as she stepped under the spray.

"Linda was being mean with her conditioner, so we shampooed her." Gillian stated.

Hilary rolled her eyes, "You're not that poor, Linda."

"They should bring their own stuff, Hilary."

Hilary squirted conditioner at her. "Here, have some of mine."

"So bloody childish." Linda stomped out of the showers.

Hilary motioned to the departing women, "What's up with her?"

Gillian and Laura shrugged.

"Oh well." Hilary poured some shower gel into her hand. "You two going for a drink?"

"Yeah, where did you have in mind?" Gill turned off her shower and picked up her bottle of shampoo.

"What about the clubhouse upstairs?"

"Means leaving the cars, Hilary." Laura cautioned.

"Yeah, I suppose."

"What about Madogs?" Laura suggested.

"As good a place to start as any." Gillian agreed.

Most of the team sat in Madogs enjoying a happy hour cocktail. The mood had picked up since the dressing room, helped by the non-appearance of Valerie, who had opted to head straight home. Gill looked around at her teammates, all chatting about their summer holidays amongst many other topics. She looked at Emma Hughes, the quiet Dubliner. Gill remembered her from the mixed hockey game a few weeks back. Emma was sipping on a Pina colada, looking relaxed and happy in the company of her new teammates, but her posture was very correct, which made Gill smile. She was a lovely looking woman, which Gill had noticed that very first time she saw her hitting with Hilary.

"Leave her alone, Gillian."

Gill almost jumped at the whispered words in her ear. "Hilary! I nearly choked on my drink."

"I saw where you were looking."

"Can you blame me? She's lovely."

Hilary's eyes momentarily slid to Emma, then back to Gill. "She is, but I don't think she's the type that just hops into bed on a first date."

Gill pursed her lips, "Shame."

"She's already turned down a few offers at the hospital."

"Yeah? Tell me a little more about her?"

"She's good at her job, very punctual. Has a great rapport with her patients and other staff members. Confident and trustworthy. Always well turned out."

Gill rolled her eyes, "Thanks for that, Hilary."

"You're most welcome, Gillian." The doctor grinned, "Are you hungry?"

"Starving."

"What do you fancy eating?"

Gill smiled saucily at Hilary.

"Like I said, I don't think she's on the menu."

"Oh, well, how about Mexican?"

"Sounds good, but we might struggle to get a table on a Saturday night."

"Let's just wander out and see what we can find."

"We're going to end up in Pizza Hut or eating a take-away in the street."

Gill laughed, "Wouldn't be the first time."

The two friends walked over to where most of their teammates were sitting, chatting and drinking. "Anyone want to join us for a bite to eat?" Gill addressed the entire table and waited whilst some debated what they wanted to do. She was pleased when Emma agreed almost immediately to join them. But then again, Hilary was about the only person on the team that she knew so far. Still, it would be fun getting to know a little more about her. Finally, seven of the original team left Madogs together and went to find somewhere to eat. They couldn't get a place at any of the Mexican restaurants but eventually found a table in one of the many Italian eateries dotted around the city's George Street.

"Gillian, who gets pizza with potatoes on it?" Linda asked. Sounding almost disgusted with the idea.

"It's on the menu so I'm assuming I'm not the only person who orders it." Gill replied in a reasonable tone. "Have a taste when it arrives, you might be surprised."

Laura watched the conversation as she sipped on her white wine, "Linda, what's bitten your arse today? You've done nothing but moan and pick faults."

Linda glanced around the table at her teammates, "I'm sorry, it's been a stressful few days."

"Heavy work load?" Laura enquired.

Linda shook her head, "No, it's more of a personal nature."

Gill shared a glance with Hilary, both of them wondering if Linda would say any more, but it was Laura who continued the conversation. "I thought you and Richard split up a while ago?"

"We did."

"So are you seeing someone new?" Laura just kept prodding and to everyone's surprise Linda flushed red.

"Oh, that's an interesting colour." Hilary remarked.

Everyone watched in astonishment as Linda thumped her glass down on the table before addressing everyone present. "I have been seeing someone new and Richard suspected me of having an affair. I denied both, so Richard let himself into my flat and hid in the wardrobe. When I got into bed with my new lover, he jumped out from it and created a scene."

Gillian almost sprayed her wine all over the table, but managed to get her hand over her mouth in time. Emma looked utterly shocked. Laura coolly sipped on her wine and said, "I bet that was an unexpected surprise."

Hilary regained her composure first. "Oh my goodness, Linda, what did you do?"

"Well, after the screaming stopped, I demanded that Richard return my keys and I threw him out of my flat."

Something didn't sound right to Gill. "Why did he wait until you both got into bed?"

"Because he wanted to be sure."

"Didn't Richard try to punch the guy?" Laura asked.

Linda went red again and looked very uncomfortable. "I was with a woman. That's why Richard didn't come out until we actually got into bed, I think he got even more of a shock than me and Mel."

"Jesus Christ!" Hilary exclaimed.

"So, you've been shagging a woman since you and Richard split up and he hid in the wardrobe and caught you at it. That's a new one." Laura poured herself more wine and topped up Linda's glass. "There, have some more wine, Linda."

"Thank you."

The rest of the table were yet to speak, still shocked at what they had heard. Hilary looked at Gillian and could see her shoulders shaking. "It's not funny, Gillian."

Gillian looked up, she had tears in her eyes and her face was flushed from the effort of trying to keep her laughter in. She couldn't hold it any longer and as she began to laugh, so did everyone else at the table. "I'm sorry, Linda," she said between breath's, "But that is one of the funniest things I've heard in a long time." As the laughter settled down and the food arrived, Linda finally relaxed and even managed a little giggle herself and, after trying a bit, admitted that Gillian's

pizza was really quite tasty.

With the bill settled and everyone heading home, Gill couldn't decide what to do. It would be easy enough to walk the half-mile to the gay bars next to the playhouse theatre and, since there were no taxis with their orange light on, it looked like she was walking regardless of what she chose to do. The group of friends walked down to Princes street and then split to head their separate ways. Gillian found herself walking with Laura and Emma. Laura heading to the Waverley Bridge to catch a night bus home, which was on Gillian's way.

"What about you, Emma, are you getting a bus, or going to wait for a taxi at the rank?" Gill enquired.

"I'm walking home, I live on the Royal Mile."

"Oh, me too, we can keep each other company?"

If Gill had looked at Laura, she would have seen her roll her eyes. The three walked down the Waverley Bridge and said their goodbyes, leaving Gillian and Emma alone.

"Which part of the Royal Mile are you on, Emma?"

"Ah, the Canongate, just behind the Pancho Villa restaurant."

"Oh, we're almost neighbours, I live just a couple of hundred yards down from you, opposite the Kirk."

Emma smiled, "I like the Old Town."

"I know what you mean, I always wanted to live here." They had reached the main junction at the top of Jeffrey Street, and Gill knew Emma was almost home. "If you ever need a lift to training or to games, my number is on the team sheet, you probably got the email?"

"Yes, I did, thank you. I don't have a car, so if I'm picked to play for the first team, I may take you up on that offer, especially for away games."

Gill smiled, "Trust me, Emma, you will definitely be in the first team. If there had ever been any doubts, today's performance removed them."

"Well, I hope you're right, I really enjoyed today's games."

They had arrived at the close where Emma walked through to her flat. "I'll see you on Tuesday, Emma."

"Yes, oh and Gillian?"

Gill turned in expectation, hoping for an invite to Emma's flat.

"Are you carrying an injury?"

Gill frowned, momentarily flummoxed, "Ah, yes, but it's healed, I'm in the process of regaining full fitness. I haven't been able to sprint for about four weeks, but the physio gave me the all clear last week to resume full training."

"That's great, well thanks for walking back with me. Goodnight."

"Night, Emma." Gill watched as her new teammate walked through the close and inserted her key into the lock of one of the old buildings in the courtyard behind. Seeming to sense she was still there, Emma turned and waved at her before going inside. Gill sighed, then regained her composure and, instead of walking the couple of hundred yards down to her own flat, she cut down New Street and, less than ten minutes later, was in C.C. Blooms.

Chapter 9

It was a sunny, late August evening. Gill parked in an available spot at the home ground of Dunedin ladies and removed her sunglasses. She looked over at the fenced off plastic pitch, then at the many rugby pitches beyond. She inhaled deeply of the fresh air, very much looking forward to the new season. Gill greeted some of the other players who had arrived early, then she walked across to the enormous playing fields and stood on the grass doing some gentle stretching exercises.

"Hey, Gill, you going for a jog?" asked Caroline, the second team captain.

"I am, I thought a couple of times around the park before we begin training."

"Sounds good."

The pair began at a gentle trot. They were about to do three miles and Gill would set a faster pace for the second lap.

"What's going to happen with the first team? Will anyone from last season be dropped?"

"We are definitely adding one new player to the squad, I want to add two. That means we will most likely be dropping players."

"Do you know who?"

"The team for the weekend won't be selected until after training tonight, you know the drill better

than I do, Caroline."

"True, but I thought you might already know."

"I only know who I want to drop, that might not be in agreement with the rest of the selectors."

They were passing the large oak tree, which marked roughly the half way spot of their first lap.

"I might be in agreement." Caroline suggested.

Gill turned to look at her. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, I want to select purely on merit, I believe that to be the fairest way."

"I agree with that."

Gill knew she had an ally and accepted the olive branch she was being handed. "I'm going to suggest that Valerie be dropped to the seconds."

They began breathing a little harder as they tackled the incline in the far corner of the large playing fields. "You know Sheila wasn't the only person keeping her in the first team last season?"

"Well, Hilary was selecting also."

Caroline shook her head, "Yes, but Hilary never selected Val, she remained in the first team only because the two selectors for the seconds never agreed with Hilary. They simply didn't want a disruptive influence like Valerie in their team."

Though a little surprised to hear this, Gill couldn't blame last season's second team captain and vice captain. Wherever Val played, she was going to be a disruptive influence on that team. "And you're willing to put up with her antics?"

They reached the top of the incline and the ground flattened out again. "I want to select who I believe to be truly worth their place. If that means Valerie playing in the seconds, that's how it has to be."

"I'm delighted to hear that, Caroline. I look forward to working with you on selection."

"Welcome."

Gill increased her pace as she began her second lap, all chat ceasing and soon Caroline was left trailing in Gillian's wake as she practically ran the final stretch at 400m pace.

Gillian continued at a slow jog as she caught her breath and her heart rate began to slow. The car park was really busy now with most of the players having arrived for training. Gill jogged to her car and removed her shin guards and stick bag from the boot, before making her way to the plastic pitch.

"You're cutting it fine."

Gillian looked at Val wondering what the hell she was on about. It was still a couple of minutes before training officially got under way and Gill had spent the previous twenty minutes running.

"I'm on time, Valerie."

Scott, the first team coach had laid down cones for stick work and was now splitting the team into groups of four for drills.

"I don't know why we're bothering with this. We should be going on a five mile run."

Gill looked at Val like she had lost her mind. "Why would you want to do that?"

"It will improve our fitness."

"We have a hockey pitch here, this is the time to be doing stick work and tactics, practice short corners, hit outs and push ins. We can all work on fitness in our own time."

Val was unhappy. "I think some of us could do with improving our fitness." She looked pointedly at Gillian.

"Are you saying I'm not match fit?"

"I'm saying, I last better in a match than you do, so perhaps you and some others could do with improving your fitness."

Gillian had finally had enough of this woman and it was time to get a few points off her chest. "I agree that you are fresher than me at the end of a game."

Some team members looked aghast at Gill, but she had a smile on her face. "However, there are reasons for that. Firstly, I put in twice the effort you do. I sprint further and faster and more frequently. I don't stand around waiting for the ball to be put on my stick, I look for it. I run into space to receive and unselfishly make space for my teammates. Consequently, I see a lot more of the ball in a match than you do and I create a lot more chances than you do. Now, I say we stay on this pitch and work on keeping the ball on our stick. Some of us could really do with improving that side of our game. You only want to go on a five-mile run because you don't want your inadequacies to show up. It doesn't really matter how fit you are if you can't keep the ball on your stick."

"I'm not staying around to listen to this!"

Valerie stormed off in a huff and everyone watched her go.

"Well, that told her." Hilary remarked.

Gill looked around at her teammates, "I'm sorry, I just couldn't listen to her nonsense anymore."

"No need to apologise, she had it coming. She's been creating an unpleasant atmosphere for a good while now and getting away with it." Hilary added.

"I nearly wet myself when you said she couldn't keep the ball on her stick." Laura remarked.

Gillian remained serious. "As harsh as it sounds, her best days are behind her and she has to face some stark realities. It's time for her to drop to the seconds. It's not fair on other players that she remains in the first team simply because she will have a hissy fit if she is dropped. There are better players than her not getting a game for the firsts."

There was a chorus of agreements.

"Can we get on with training then?" Scott enquired.

"Yes, let's get started," Sheila confirmed. The captain had remained quiet throughout the argument between Gillian and Valerie and Gill wondered what Sheila would have to say after training, at selection.

"So that's it settled then? Valerie Smith is being dropped down to the second team?" Caroline Mills, the second team captain had been instrumental in supporting Gillian to get the decision passed. The eight selectors were all in agreement, including Sheila, who had the strongest say in the matter.

"How do you wish to proceed, Sheila?" Caroline enquired.

"I'll give her a call, but I know she will refuse to play for the seconds."

"Probably, but she only has two choices available to her. Play for the second's or join another club."

"She'll say she isn't playing and then she will turn up for the seconds game on Saturday in a foul mood."

"Why do you think that, Gillian?"

"If she goes to another club, she won't get any special treatment, she will simply be a new player."

All her friends and her reputation are here. She'll stay, but she is going to make the second team a miserable place to be at times."

"Are we making the right decision here?" Sheila asked.

"We are making the right decision in accordance with the club's selection policy. I think we have to stick to that." Caroline replied.

"Here! Here!" were the replies, and that was it. The decision was final.

Gillian left the selection meeting with a bad taste in her mouth. It didn't feel good to be dropping Val, she took no joy from it, but it was the right decision. On a sporting level, she felt sorry for Val having to come to terms with the fact that she was no longer good enough to play for the first team, but that was the only reason Gill felt sympathy. The woman had been an obnoxious bully from the time Gill joined the club and her temper had people afraid to drop her. That was wrong and it was finally about to be addressed. She did feel genuinely sorry for the members of the second team; they were in for a turbulent time with the moody, bad tempered Valerie Smith.

Thursday evening training was abuzz with the news that Valerie had been dropped. The only person not talking about it was the woman herself, who had not turned up for the training session that saw each team practice specifically for their weekend match. Gill was standing on the sideline removing a hockey stick from her bag.

"Are you regretting your decision?"

Gill turned to look at Hilary knowing exactly what she was referring to. "Nope."

"I have to admit, Gillian, I never knew you had it in you."

"I took no pleasure in it, but we both know it was the right and fair decision."

Hilary nodded, "I can't disagree with that."

"As I hear it, you yourself were after this last season, but got no back-up."

"As you say, it's the right decision. It was last season too."

"Going to be hell in the seconds though." The pair began jogging towards the far goalmouth area, where their teammates were hitting in pairs.

"Yup," Hilary replied as she trapped a stray ball and began a short push pass and dribble routine with Gillian, the pair seamlessly swapping places to work alternately on their front and reverse stick. "I think you should be back to defend penalty corners."

Gill trapped the ball dead on the turf and stood up to look at Hilary. "Are you serious?"

"You're the quickest player at this club. It makes sense."

"It would mean putting my head in the line of fire."

"Someone has to do it."

"True, I can't argue with that."

"Are you scared?" Hilary grinned, knowing she was baiting her friend.

"No, you know I'm not."

"Let's give it a go, you've already taken the strong step of dropping Val, I think it's time for you to step up and allow this club to utilise its main assets, and that, Gillian, means you. You might as well go all the way with this and implement the changes now."

Gill knocked the solid orange ball from left to right over and over with her stick as she thought about what Hilary was suggesting. Finally she stopped and let out a deep breath as she locked eyes with Hilary. "Some people may think I'm taking over."

"You're a born leader, Gillian, with lots of ability to back up your decisions. No one can refute that."

"It means I will be striking our attacking corners and be the main rushing defender when we defend corners."

Hilary nodded, "Tell me who you would pick instead?"

Gill looked out over the pool of first team players as she considered Hilary's question. "Fay is quick, as is Jane; she is the runner at the moment. I may not be the quickest over the first sixteen yards." Gill added reasonably.

Hilary nodded her agreement. "Why don't we find out then?"

Gill shook her head and pointed the end of her stick at her teammate. "You're trouble, Hilary Duffy!"

Hilary laughed, "Come on. Let's get these penalty corner routines ironed out before the weekend."

By the end of training that evening it was clear that Gillian was indeed the quickest over sixteen yards, and easily the fastest player over 100 yards, the length of the hockey pitch, not only in the

first team, but out of the entire club. If serving no other purpose, the impromptu sprints made the decision to make Gillian first runner at defending corners an easy one to implement and for the rest of the team to accept.

Emma had watched the proceedings with a keen eye. A few short weeks ago she had assumed Gillian Rae was a gifted player with no pace. So much for first appearances, she thought, as she had watched the young woman eat up the turf in a tracksuit and pair of Astroturf shoes. She turned to Hilary as they walked from the pitch at the end of their two hours. "What time can Gillian do for the 100 metres?"

"I'm not sure but she has been hand timed at 10.78 seconds for 100 yards."

Emma nodded, conceding that, although not as long as 100 metres, it was a very decent time.

"She was timed on a cold night, wearing a tracksuit and a pair of training shoes...on grass."

"Grass?" Emma repeated.

Hilary nodded, "Imagine what she could do in a pair of spikes on a proper track."

"Has she never wanted to find out?"

"Seems not, although she is entering for the New Year's sprint this year."

"What's that?"

"An annual race run over 110 metres with four thousand pounds to the winner, anyone can enter. It's a handicap event that has never been won by a woman."

"You think Gillian can win it?"

"With the handicap system in place, she has a great chance of doing it. You should come along and watch, will be a good day out."

"When is it?"

"Tuesday 29th December. We are going to make a day of it. There is a horse meeting on as well as the New Year's sprint meeting, should be fun, if a bit cold. If nothing else we might get to see Gillian fall flat on her face in the mud."

The pair laughed.

Chapter 10

Gill drove the very short distance to Emma's flat. It was the first league game of the season and she was really looking forward to it. Parking outside the Mexican restaurant, Emma, as expected, was already there. Gill pushed the button to operate her electric window. "Afternoon, boot's open."

Emma smiled and put her kit and stick bag in the boot, before getting into the passenger seat. "Hi, Gillian, thanks so much for giving me a lift."

"You're most welcome, we can't have you using up valuable energy cycling to the games."

"It's very much appreciated."

"Oh, something smells fantastic," Gill exclaimed, as she looked at the Tupperware boxes on Emma's lap."

"It's my contribution to match teas, I was allocated cakes."

"Are those chocolate brownies?"

Emma didn't miss the longing look on Gill's face and she opened the top box.

"May I?" Gillian asked, looking like a kid desperate for a treat.

"Go on."

Gill selected a brownie and immediately took a bite. "Oh, these are fantastic!" she declared around a mouthful. "Did you bake all this yourself?"

Emma looked a little embarrassed, "Yes, I really do love to cook and I don't often get the chance to bake lots of goodies. I usually only bake for special causes, otherwise I would pile on the pounds eating all the cakes."

Gill's eyes closed and she hummed with pleasure. "Trust me, anytime you feel the need to bake, I'll help you eat everything." Gill started the car, the last piece of brownie being held between her teeth as she manoeuvred out into the busy Saturday afternoon traffic. She stopped a short distance up the road. "Be right back." And before Emma could answer Gillian was jogging into a nearby sandwich shop. Emma watched her walk back out less than a minute later with two trays of sandwiches in her hands. Gill motioned for Emma to open the car door.

"This is my contribution to match teas, I'm on sandwiches. Gerry always makes them for me."

Emma looked incredulously at Gillian as the trays of freshly made, professionally arranged sandwiches were thrust at her.

"Make sure they don't get squashed. I've gone to a lot of trouble making those." Gill laughed as she jogged around to the driver's side and got into the car, where Emma sat holding the tray's staring at Gillian in disbelief.

"What?"

"You went to the local sandwich shop to have the sandwiches made instead of simply making them at home?"

Gill nodded as she started the engine and pulled out again into busy traffic. "Trust me, if you had seen my previous efforts you would understand. Besides, it leaves me time for other stuff."

Emma wondered why Gillian didn't ask her partner to help with the sandwiches if she was so bad, but it wasn't her business or place to inquire. "What are the team we are playing today like?"

"Ah, I don't know too much about them. They won the second division last season, so are newly promoted. I think it will be a tough game today. They are riding high on their promotion. They haven't suffered any defeats yet this season to dampen their confidence, so we will need to be fully concentrated on the task at hand today. It's a home game for us, so we should be winning regardless of who we play."

"Did you win every home game last season?"

"No, but we should have."

"What are your expectations for this season, Gillian?"

Gill gave that a little thought. "For the team, I want us to win something. It will be tough to shake the grip of the big two, but I think we have a chance. At the very least, I want us to finish third, but preferably higher. On a personal note, I would like to finish as the league's top scorer."

Emma nodded, not surprised that Gillian had high expectations of both the team and herself. She did wonder about international hockey for Gillian. "Can I ask you a question, Gillian?"

"Shoot."

"Why is it that you don't play for Scotland?"

Gill frowned, she had never received a call up to the national squad and she doubted she ever would. It wasn't the first time she had been asked this question and she knew it wouldn't be the last, but Emma knew nothing of her past, so Gillian decided to be a little more forthcoming with the truth than usual.

"My face doesn't exactly fit."

Emma nodded, "That explains a little."

"How so?"

"Well, I mean no disrespect to any other players but, in my personal opinion, you have the skill and the game to play for the national team. I've seen two players who have been called up into the development squad and you are better than either of them, in my opinion."

Gill sighed, "I don't expect a call up any time soon. There was eh, an incident or two when I played for the under twenty-one squad and I don't think I'm ever going to be forgiven. I have been told that if I *mend my ways* I might be considered in the future, but I doubt that even if I stopped having any kind of social life it would ever happen."

Emma nodded and Gill was pleased that she didn't make further enquiries as to the exact nature of the misdemeanours that resulted in her being banned from representing her country at any level. They were almost at the hockey club and Gill thought she would turn the tables. "What about you, any caps for Ireland?" Gill glanced over at Emma and smiled.

"Yes, but none recently."

"That could all change this season. No disrespect to Irish hockey, but you have your potential players split between, what's that game you play where you wear helmets and the sticks are like big clubs?"

"Camogie?"

"That's it. Irish woman either play camogie or hockey, so you have less hockey players in Ireland. Don't get me wrong, Scotland isn't the greatest league either. That's why we have Scottish players playing over in Holland and German, they have a very high standard there."

Gill parked and immediately got out of the car knowing Emma was effectively trapped in the passenger seat surrounded by home baking and sandwiches. Gill opened the passenger door, "Here, let me give you a hand with that."

"Thanks," Emma remarked dryly.

"We'll drop our food off in the clubhouse kitchen."

Emma followed Gill into the clubhouse. It was fairly quiet at that moment as there were currently three rugby games and one hockey game on and most people were outside watching.

"Don't worry about anything else, some of the spectators or the second team will lay the teas out for us, we return the favour when we can, but we are usually the last slot for home games, so mostly we owe a lot of favours." Gill looked out the windows that banked the back wall of the clubhouse and out onto the hockey pitch. There on the pitch, not twenty yards away, was Valerie

Smith, with a face like thunder, muttering to herself.

She turned to Emma, "Would you like to go out and watch some of the second's game?"

Emma nodded and the pair took the short walk outside to join the spectators who had gathered on the sidelines to watch the game. Gill stood next to Yvonne Reynolds, a stalwart of the Dunedin ladies hockey club, and now president. The woman had retired over ten years ago at the age of forty-five, gracefully moving down the teams as she enjoyed the simple pleasure of playing the game. "What's the score, Yvonne?"

"Hello, Gillian. It's one all, a close game."

"How's Val been playing?"

Yvonne raised an eyebrow, "Let's just say you're not flavour of the month amongst the second string."

"Hmm, they'll come round, and hopefully Val will start to impart her vast knowledge of the game and help some of the younger players along."

"Well I certainly admire your optimism, but that woman is a brat. She was a brat when I met her as a youngster when she joined the club and she's still a brat twenty years later."

Gillian nodded, "I hope she isn't too disruptive an influence on the team."

Yvonne turned to Gill and patted her on the shoulder. "Regardless of her antics, you made the right decision from a hockey perspective. She isn't even the best player out there today, the second string is most definitely where she belongs."

"Thanks, Yvonne."

"And who do we have here?" Yvonne pinned Emma with a warm gaze.

"Ahh, please excuse my bad manners. Yvonne, this is Emma Hughes. She's joined us from Dublin Ladies, having taken a job here in Edinburgh. Emma, this is Yvonne Reynolds, our club president."

The pair shook hands, "Lovely to meet you, Emma, please excuse Gillian's manners, she's great with a hockey stick, take it away and she flounders like a fish out of water, unless of course there is a pretty woman present."

"There are two."

"Ahh, there's the famous charm." Yvonne said fondly.

They watched as Val mishit a ball in front of goal but, luckily, it was quickly pounced upon by

her striking partner and duly dispatched into the goal past the stranded keeper. The spectators burst into warm applause while shouting their encouragement.

"Shall we call that an assist?" Gillian joked.

Yvonne smiled, "I'm sure she will be claiming it."

"You staying around for our game?"

"Of course, and I expect to see goals."

"I'll do my best. We better get going, we'll be starting our warm up in a few minutes."

"Have a good game, you two, lovely to meet you, Emma. Gillian you be good."

"I'm *always* good."

Yvonne laughed, genuinely charmed with Gillian and Emma wondered if there was a woman on the planet that her teammate didn't flirt with.

The pair picked up their hockey kit from the boot of Gillian's car and headed into the changing room that was already filled with their teammates. The opposition had arrived and they were busy getting ready in one of the other rooms. With the second's game finishing, both teams exited the changing rooms to begin their warm up. After a half hour warm up, Dunedin ladies first team went back to their changing room for a last team talk and to make final preparations for the match. Gill could feel her anticipation build as the 4 p.m. start drew ever nearer. Removing her tracksuit and training top, she pulled on her number eight shirt. A tight fitting, short sleeved cotton v-neck in navy and green. Next she slipped on her short skirt over a pair of skimpy navy lycra shorts. Fitting her shin guards into her socks, she pulled the long white socks with the navy and green stripe at the top over the shin guards, holding them in place. Rechecking the laces of her Astroturf trainers, Gillian then redid her ponytail, making sure every bit of hair was neatly pinned back. Tucking her gum shield into the waistband of her skirt, Gillian put the protective glove onto her left hand and picked up her stick bag. She was ready to do battle with the opposition. Taking a few deep breaths, Dunedin ladies left the changing rooms and marched the fifty yards over to the pitch, clapping and offering words of encouragement to each other as they went.

Gillian walked into the clubhouse for match teas. It had been a good solid display from Dunedin, winning the match by four goals to one and Gill had scored a hat trick. The match teas were a low-key affair, but after the opposition had left the celebrations began.

"Okay, Gillian first round is on you." Hilary remarked.

"You have to be kidding me."

"You know the rules, if you score a hat trick you buy a round." Laura backed Hilary up.

The chant started to go up as Gillian wanted to protest more. "Jug! Jug! Jug! Jug!"

Gill got up amid cheers and headed to the bar.

"Well played, Gillian."

"Thanks, Peter." Gill said to the president of the rugby club.

"You keep this up, you will be needing to take on a second job."

"Any work going behind the bar?"

The older gentleman laughed, "I don't think we will be seeing you that side of it somehow."

"True." Gill turned to the barmaid, "Hi, Glenda, I need about, oh," Gill looked over at the first team, there were also several other hockey players and spectators still in the far corner of the clubhouse. The place was packed with rugby players too. "Give me five jugs of beer, Brenda, I think that will get all the hockey crowd a drink."

"I'll bring them over, Gill, go back and have a seat."

"How much is that?"

Peter closed his hand over Gillian's as she went to get money from her purse. "Put that away, Gillian, the club will be paying for this."

Gill was about to protest, but knew she would lose. "Thank you, Peter, that's very generous."

"Enjoy your evening, Gillian."

"Thanks, I will."

As the beer flowed liberally and the evening wore on, Gillian found herself sitting next to Emma. "You had a really good game today. I'm delighted you decided to join us."

"Thanks, Gillian. I'm enjoying my hockey and you had a fantastic game yourself. Three goals is a great start towards being the league's top scorer again."

Gill smiled at Emma, "You have such a lovely accent, I could listen to you talk all day."

"Oh, well you know, we all have them back in Dublin." Emma was a little flustered with Gillian's attention. Though she wasn't looking for any kind of romance, she wasn't immune to

feeling flattered by the attentions of a good-looking woman. Even one that oozed charm like Gillian.

"Would you like to go to the cinema with me on Wednesday? There's a new film I'd really like to see."

Emma's face turned serious, "Wouldn't you rather go with your family?" she replied testily.

Gillian was perplexed and wondering why Emma would make such a suggestion. "My parents enjoy eating out, Jazz and travelling, they aren't so keen on the cinema and my sister Margaret hardly has any spare time to do anything with a husband and three kids on her hands. Why would I be wanting to go to the cinema with them?"

Emma was very unimpressed with Gillian's blatant subterfuge. "Look, it's ultimately not really any of my business, Gillian, but I'm not going to be your latest conquest. You have a lovely girlfriend and I assume you share the parenting of that beautiful little redheaded girl. Maybe you should concentrate more on them?"

Gill's eyes widened in surprise before she burst out laughing, much to Emma's disgust.

"It isn't funny."

This statement only made Gill laugh harder. She eventually managed to take a few deep breaths and compose herself long enough to explain, "I don't have a girlfriend."

"I saw you with her!"

"When?"

"At a summer hockey game, the one where you were fooling around with Hilary."

Gill stopped to think about that, recalling how Justine and Charlotte had met her at the end of the match."

"Emma, Justine is my best friend and Charlotte is her kid. I was babysitting for Charlotte that evening so Justine could go on a date."

Emma's mouth formed an 'o', but no sound came out. This only caused Gill to laugh more. "You looked like a family. I saw you kiss her on the lips!" Emma accused.

Gill shook her head as she wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes. "I have been best friends with Justine since we were twelve years old. I kissed her because she had cooked dinner for me. I suppose we are like a little family."

"I see." Emma paused, "Well don't I feel like the fool. I apologise, Gillian."

"There's no need, Emma, really. I can understand why you thought that, and for the record, I'm inviting you to the cinema as a friend, there's no hidden agenda. I like spending time with you and I thought you might like to socialise a bit more. I mean I know you have been in Edinburgh a couple of months now, but I'm always looking to go to the cinema, or sometimes the theatre, or out for a meal. So if you are ever looking for someone to go out with, give me a call."

"I really would love to go to the cinema, I haven't been in ages."

"Great! I'm glad we got all that sorted out."

The pair laughed at the misunderstanding and went to the bar to get another drink.

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~ The Player ~

by weebod

Disclaimer: This is an original story. The main characters and the story are the product of the author's imagination.

Rated NC17: For profanity and sex

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

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Chapter 11

Hilary Duffy watched as Gillian and Emma exited Gill's car, both full of smiles. They were obviously sharing a laugh about something. The pair went to the boot of the car and Hilary saw Gillian pass Emma's kitbag to her, evidently saying something in the process as it prompted a playful push from the blonde Irish woman. Hilary turned to look at one or two of her teammates who had also witnessed the exchange; noticing a few raised eyebrows. Then she got down to the business of sorting out who was driving their car to today's away match in Dundee.

Two hours later, on a cold, autumn afternoon, Dunedin ladies were doing their pre match warm

up. Jogging around the pitch, Gillian felt a foot taller, her legs full of power and pace, and she couldn't wait for the whistle to start the game. As the warm-up increased in intensity, Gill could feel the heat begin to radiate throughout her layers of clothing, warming the muscles ready for action. The closer it got to the game starting, the more spectators began to gather on the sidelines. Gill took a deep breath of the chilly air. It was a terrific afternoon for hockey. Cool and crisp, Gill's favourite weather for playing.

"What's going on with you and Emma?" Hilary asked as she jogged up beside her friend.

Gill turned to look at her as she shook her head. "Nothing, we're friends."

"The two of you looked very cosy as you arrived at the meeting point today."

"Oh, we spent the morning together, Emma helped me with the school hockey as we were short of an umpire."

"And you have been going out together on Wednesday evenings."

Gill shrugged as they began a second lap, "What can I say, I enjoy spending time with her."

"You realise this is like you having a girlfriend without the sex?"

Gill frowned as she watched Hilary sprint away from her, leaving Gill pondering her words. She shook her head, concluding that Hilary was being ridiculous.

With the warm up over and team talk delivered, Gill felt like she was going to have one of those days. Her nerves were tingling; she was really up for today's game. A win would see them move into second place in the league and Gill really wanted it.

With five minutes to go before the start, the first team squad gathered at their bench on the half way line and started stripping off their tracksuits. With the uniforms on and gum shields in place, they heard Scott deliver a few final words of wisdom; then the starting eleven lined up, ready for battle.

Gill took her spot on the left side of the centre line, her stick poised and ready. It felt good in her hands, the weight perfect. With a final twist of her feet in her snug fitting, size seven Astro shoes, Gill waited until the umpire blew the whistle to start the game, then immediately darted towards the centre circle in an attempt to intercept the ball from the oppositions push back.

The game was being played at a ferocious pace, neither team giving any quarter. A hard flat pass out of defence bypassed the Dunedin midfield and found its way onto Gill's stick. Collecting the ball whilst running at full tilt, Gill immediately drove down the right wing. Unfortunately, none of her teammates had yet caught up with her sudden breakaway and, as she attempted to hold the ball up near the corner, she was surrounded by three defenders who, in closing her down, managed to touch the ball onto Gill's foot, giving the opposition a free hit.

The game continued to rage on, with Dundee Wanderers seeing slightly more of the ball, but the chances were even, with neither side converting. But that changed in the fourteenth minute when Hilary Duffy foiled an attack by the Wanderers. Intercepting the ball, Hilary drove out of defence and sent a quick pass towards Emma, who was breaking out fast from left midfield. The pass was inch perfect allowing Emma to take the ball in her stride. She was thirty yards from goal when she played a one two with young Melinda, who immediately pushed the ball back into Emma's path. Emma then drilled the ball, full pace, into the opposition circle where the onrushing Gillian Rae, at full stretch, deflected the ball past the rooted goalkeeper and high into the top right corner of the net. The goalie didn't even have time to move towards the ball as it zipped through the air.

The away crowd cheered loudly in appreciation of the well worked goal and Gillian immediately turned to thank the creators. The quartet were soon mobbed by their teammates offering congratulations.

Gillian was buzzing, seeing a lot of the ball and beginning to run the opposition's defence ragged. She really felt there were more goals in this game for her. As a Wanderer's defender overstretched for a ball, it clipped her stick and spun into the space between her and the goalkeeper. Gillian knew she had the speed to get there first and her legs were already propelling her in that direction. The defender was done for pace and Gill knew she could easily pass her. But instead, the next thing Gill felt was excruciating pain around her left eye. As Gill's hands flew to her face, her stick fell to the turf, closely followed by Gillian herself.

She wasn't exactly sure what had happened and, at that specific moment in time, she was in so much pain she didn't care. She knew she was lying flat on the turf and that her shoes were scrapping along it as she rolled about trying desperately to alleviate the pain. Finally managing to get to her feet, she attempted to pick up her stick, only to find herself staggering about and she would have fallen again if a pair of strong hands on her shoulders hadn't steadied her.

"Stand still and let me have a look, Gillian."

Gill did as Hilary instructed, the seriousness of her tone making Gillian immediately do as she was told.

"Take your hand away from your eye, come on." Hilary gently removed Gill's hand, which was firmly holding the left side of her face. "That's it, let me have a look."

Gill knew lots of people were around her, but she was on her feet and, although in pain, all she wanted to do was continue playing.

"Hmm, the cut below your eye needs stitches, probably the one just above as well."

That statement momentarily brought Gill to her senses. "There are two?"

"Stop being a drama queen and get off the pitch, you're bleeding all over it."

"Some bloody doctor you are," Gill complained.

Hilary slapped Gill heartily on the back and called over to some of the spectators. "Can two of you help Gill from the pitch and someone drive her to Accident and Emergency?"

Gill protested, "You stitch it, then I can keep playing."

Hilary rolled her eyes. "Okay, Gillian, pick up your stick."

Gill stumbled again and, as they made their way off the pitch, Hilary put her arm around her to keep her steady. Making sure Gillian couldn't hear, Hilary whispered to Caroline, the seconds captain, "Tell whoever takes Gill to casualty to keep an eye on her, she has a concussion."

"Don't worry, I'll go with her."

"Thanks, Caroline."

As Gillian was being led slowly to the car park, the hose was brought out to wash down the area of the pitch where she had been standing. Emma Hughes watched as Gill's blood was diluted with the water and pushed towards the side of the pitch. Then she assisted the other players in using their feet, to help scrub away the large stains. Seeing how Gillian stumbled again as she made her way to a waiting car, Emma just hoped her teammate was going to be okay.

Gill sat in the car and looked at her gloved left hand, it was covered in blood. She felt groggy and a little sick, but at least the stinging pain had eased a bit.

Caroline sat in the back seat with her. "The bleeding has almost stopped, Gill, but you're in a hell of a mess."

"Thanks, Caroline."

Hazel Morgan glanced in the rear view mirror at the player she had a big crush on. She wanted to be sitting where Caroline was.

"You okay, Gillian?" Hazel asked.

"I've felt better."

"You've looked better."

Gill attempted to laugh at the joke and instantly regretted it. She laid her head back and took a few deep breaths.

"Keep your eyes open and keep talking to me, Gillian."

"I think I can only open one eye."

Caroline made a face as Gill removed her hand. She nodded, "Yeah, you can only open one."

Gill sat in the busy Accident and Emergency department and glanced down at her white shirt, the front splattered with blood. She could even see blood on her white socks and her Astro trainers. She looked around at the various injuries people were sporting, only to find that everyone seemed to be staring at her. Her eye was throbbing and she realised she must look a sight. The only saving grace was that there were no drunk and disorderly people in casualty yet. It was almost two hours before the doctor, a guy who looked to be in his late twenties, walked into the cubicle where Gillian now sat.

"Hmm, what happened to you?"

"Hockey stick in the face."

He nodded, "Well you'll need stitches for the cuts, but I'm also a little concerned about your cheekbone."

He palpated the wound and Gill winced as the pain increased. "Sorry, I just need to press a bit." He did so and Gill tolerated the pain a little longer. "Good news, cheekbone seems fine. I'll stitch you up, then send you for an x-ray, just as a precaution."

Gill sat in silence as the doctor cleaned her wounds and then began to stitch them. "Only the two stitches needed in the cut at the side, but five in the one on the cheek below the eye."

"Thanks, Doctor."

He stared into her eyes as he held her head, his hands on either side of her jawline. "Your pupils look a bit dilated, are you going to be alone tonight?"

"No, I'll make sure someone is with me."

"Good, I'll have you taken to x-ray. I'm sure the cheekbone is fine, but better to make sure. Assuming there is no fracture, you can go home. Take paracetamol for the pain and make an appointment with your GP for Thursday or Friday to have the stitches removed. Any blackouts, dizziness or sickness, you head straight to the nearest hospital."

"Thanks, Doctor, I will." Gill shook his hand, then waited to be wheeled to x-ray. Twenty minutes later, she was walking back to the busy Accident and Emergency department. Her mood lifting a little when she saw that Emma was now there, waiting with Caroline and Hazel.

"Did we win?"

Emma smiled, "Yes, two nil. It was easier playing against ten players."

"Ten players?"

"Gillian, it was assault!"

"Oh, I had no idea."

"Well she was sent off for foul play."

"Good."

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay, I suppose."

"I have your bags with me."

"Oh, great, because I have no phone or money to get home."

"I'll drive you home, Gillian," said Hazel. "You can pick your car up from Barnton when you feel up to it."

"Ah, about that, I'm going to need a lift to my parent's house, I don't really want my mum to see me like this, but I'm not allowed to be on my own tonight."

"Oh, that's oka..."

Hazel's attempted offer was cut short by Emma. "I'll stay with you, Gillian." Emma stated. "I only live up the road from you."

"Thank you, Emma."

The drive back to Edinburgh was a quiet affair. Emma shared the back seat with Gillian, talking to her occasionally; making sure she was doing fine, until Hazel dropped the two players off at Gill's flat.

"Thanks, Hazel, I'll take it from here," Emma informed the small brunette who was constantly fawning over Gillian and seemed to be hovering in the flat.

"Okay, I'll see you later, Gill, call me if you need *anything*."

Gill was sitting on her sofa, looking pale and only managed to nod slightly. Emma walked Hazel

to the door with a firm hand on her back. "Thanks, Hazel. Goodnight." With the door closed firmly behind Hazel, Emma returned to the sitting room to talk to Gillian. "Is there anything you need?"

"I just want to sleep." Gill replied groggily.

"How about painkillers, do you need some?"

"Not just now," Gill replied as she laid her head down on the arm of the sofa.

Emma looked at her friend, who was still wearing her hockey kit, not having been able to shower and change yet. "Let me give you a hand, Gillian, make you more comfortable." It was a sign of how Gill was feeling that she didn't protest or make any kind of joke out of the statement. Emma bent down to untie Gill's trainers. She removed them, along with her shinguards and socks, before encouraging Gill to put her legs up on to the sofa. Making sure she was comfortable, Emma covered Gill with the blanket that was lying on the back of the sofa. Within minutes Gill was asleep and Emma decided that she would leave her for an hour, then wake her up with something to eat. She plucked a book from the shelf in Gill's sitting room and settled down to read.

Gill awoke in the dark with a throbbing pain around her eye. She touched the base of the bedside lamp to turn it on then sat up, causing even more pain to flood into her left eye. She gingerly touched the area, remembering what had happened, before turning to look at the woman lying in the bed beside her. Gill's fingers itched to reach across and stroke Emma's hair. The Irishwoman looked so relaxed in repose, beautiful. She had looked after Gillian the previous evening, making her a light meal and chatting to her for a little while before finally helping Gill to bed. Even laying out a t-shirt and shorts for her and getting her painkillers to help Gill get a good night's sleep. Emma had then elected to sleep next to Gill, so she would be there if the injured woman needed anything more. Gill tried sitting up again more slowly and, although there was still a dull, throbbing ache, she managed it this time without a repeat of the sharp pain flooding into her swollen eye socket. Looking over again at Emma, Gill noticed the woman had a low top on and couldn't help but peek inside the duvet at the top of a softly tanned breast.

"Are you feeling better, Gillian?"

Gill's eyes flew to Emma's causing the blonde to sit up in alarm. "Are you alright? Do you need anything? Talk to me, Gillian."

"I'm, ah.." Gill cleared her throat and tried again. "I was about to get some painkillers."

"I'll get them, you stay here."

Gill watched as Emma got up and walked to the bathroom. Swallowing hard, Gill sagged back against the pillows with a soft groan.

"Here we go, Gillian." Emma handed her two paracetamol and a glass of water.

"Thanks."

"It's a little after six, do you want to try some breakfast?"

Gill worked hard to keep her eyes on Emma's face and not let them drop down to check her out. She noticed that Emma was staring at her injury. "How am I looking?"

A soft smile appeared on the blonde's face. "At the moment? Like you went ten rounds with someone, but I'm sure in a week or so you will be back to your best."

"I'm going to have scars." Gill gently touched the cut below her eye, "What do you think of facial scars, Emma?"

"I think they add character," she replied softly.

Monday morning at school brought nothing but unwanted attention to Gill. Her eye had blackened and was still almost shut. Her registration class were merciless with their taunts and it was impossible to keep order so, after taking the morning register, Gill just let them chat for the next few minutes.

"Really, Miss, that was a hockey stick?"

"Yes." Gill replied in a bored fashion, she had been asked the question so many times.

"I think you were in a punch up at a club, Miss, you look like a right raver to me. Probably stole someone's boyfriend."

There were a few laughs and Gillian found it funny too. Fortunately the bell rang and saved Gill from further scrutiny, but this would go on all day long with class after class of different pupils. "Go on, off with you and pay attention in class."

"Yes, Miss," came the chorus of droned replies.

As Gill made her way to the physical education block for her first class of the day Maggie McLure, the assistant head, intercepted her.

"Oh dear me, would you look at the state of you."

"Morning, Maggie."

"What happened, disgruntled husband, angry ex?"

"Hockey stick."

Maggie laughed, "I heard, I just had to come and see for myself. You know you look a sight, you will be scaring the kids."

"Hardly, I'm going to be the butt of jokes all day."

"Still, another positive write up for you in the Scotsman this morning."

"I haven't read it."

Maggie wagged her finger at Gillian. "You should. If this form keeps up..." Maggie left the sentence hanging.

"Won't change a thing, Maggie." Gillian quipped.

"We'll see, and in case I didn't already say, you look dreadful." Maggie walked off laughing.

Chapter 12

Gillian parked her car on Justine's street.

"Are you sure I will be welcome?"

"Of course, Justine said I could bring a friend along. Besides, I'm meeting her boyfriend formally for the first time, I need an ally."

"Thanks."

"Look on the bright side, you get a free meal out of it."

Emma shook her head.

"Seriously, you will enjoy meeting Justine and Charlotte, you know, *my family*, and Kenny seems like a nice guy. I've only met him once, but I liked him."

Emma smiled. "Give it over, I made a mistake, but you did look like a family."

"We are in a way, I come here almost every Friday night for dinner with two of my favourite people. There has to be something important on for me to miss it, and then I usually come on

Saturday evening instead." Gillian pressed the buzzer for Justine's flat and pushed the door open. She could already hear an excited Charlie one flight up, being held back from running downstairs by her mother. Gill turned to Emma, "There is no better greeting in the entire world than that of an excited four year old."

As they rounded the landing and came into view, Charlotte was already shouting her name. "Gilly! Gilly!"

Gill opened her arms in expectation and frowned as Charlotte stopped in her tracks, staring wide-eyed at Gillian, before turning and running into her mother's waiting arms.

Gill looked from Justine to Emma then back to Charlotte whose face was buried in her mother's neck. "What happened?"

Emma pointed to Gill's eye and Justine nodded as she comforted her daughter.

"Oh great, I now have a face that scares children."

Justine whispered into her daughter's ear and the little girl nodded and slowly turned her head to look at Gillian. She pointed a little finger at Gill's eye; "You got hurt."

Gillian nodded and moved closer to Charlotte, letting her look at her eye. Charlotte gently touched the healing cuts and bruising. Gillian had had her stitches removed that very afternoon, but the cuts were red and very noticeable and there was still a fair amount of bruising, though the colour was fading. "It's getting better."

"Bad lady hit you." Charlotte frowned as she said this and Justine explained that she had told Charlotte what happened.

"Yes, and the umpire punished her, so she won't hit anybody again."

Charlotte pursed her lips giving that some thought before nodding, "Good."

Gill smiled, happy that the situation seemed to be resolved. "Charlotte, I want you to meet my friend Emma."

Emma smiled and waved at Charlotte, before walking towards her and offering her a small, brightly wrapped package. Charlotte's eyes immediately lit up. "I got you a present."

Gill looked from Emma to Justine, "Oh, she's good."

Justine nodded, "No quicker way to a kid's heart."

Emma turned to look at Justine, "I hope it's okay. Gillian said not to bring anything as she was bringing wine, so I thought a little gift for Charlotte would be nice."

"Absolutely, it's very much appreciated. What do you say to Charlotte?" Justine asked her daughter.

"Thank you."

"You're most welcome, Charlotte."

Justine caught Gill's eye, but Gillian refused to take the bait, instead moving proceedings along. "Justine, meet Emma Hughes. Emma, this is my oldest and dearest friend, Justine Hill."

The pair shook hands and then the four of them went into the flat where they were introduced to Kenny who was looking after things in the kitchen.

After dinner Kenny and Emma insisted on doing the dishes, so Gillian helped Justine put Charlotte to bed. The little girl was asleep before the second page of her storybook. Gillian looked fondly at her favourite four year old. "She gets more beautiful by the week, Justine."

"Talking of beautiful women, Emma seems really nice."

Gillian gave Justine a warning look; "Just because you are moving towards marriage, don't be pushing me in that direction."

"You have never, in all the time we have been doing this, brought a woman to dinner before."

"We're friends, Justine, nothing more."

"But there could be?"

Gill shook her head. "Emma is the solid, dependable type. She's not looking for a quickie in the back of a car, or in some stranger's bedroom."

"But you're not a stranger to her, you've become friends."

"And that is my second point, I don't sleep with my friends. It ruins the friendship."

"How about not sleeping with her and dating her instead, you practically are already."

"Have you been speaking to Hilary? She was saying almost the same thing last week?" Gillian accused.

"No, but it does mean we are seeing the same thing. Emma is exactly the kind of woman you should settle down with."

"I don't *want* to settle down."

Justine was serious for a moment. "Then it's your loss."

Gillian frowned as she watched her friend leave her daughter's bedroom. What was it with people making a statement and then leaving immediately after it for dramatic effect? First Hilary and now Justine. She gave Charlotte a soft kiss on her mass of red curls. "Night little one."

The rest of the evening was a mixture of fun and good conversation. Everyone had a game the following day; Justine and Kenny had volleyball matches and Gillian and Emma had a cup-tie in the afternoon.

"Remember to conserve your energy for your game tomorrow," Gillian joked to her friend as she was leaving knowing full well Kenny was spending the night at Justine's.

Justine's eyes narrowed to slits. "You're skating on thin ice."

Gillian gave Justine her trademark cheeky grin. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

On the short car journey home Emma thanked Gill for a pleasant evening.

"Justine and Kenny are such a lovely couple, and little Charlotte is adorable."

"She was quite taken with you too, and yeah, I like Kenny, I think he will be good for Justine." Gillian had a faraway look in her eyes.

"A penny for them?"

"What? Oh, I was just thinking that things could be very different soon. Justine and Kenny seem so right for each other. I think he could be the one."

Emma nodded, "It's funny how things can change so quickly isn't it? This time last year I never imagined I would be in Edinburgh, starting a whole new chapter in my life."

Gill smiled, Emma really did understand people and human emotion so well, like a gift. "Are you happy with your choice?"

Emma thought for just a moment before answering. "I am. I was full of trepidation when I got the job and knew I would definitely be moving away from home and everyone I know. But I like it here, it's a positive step for me."

Gill parked as close to Emma's flat as she could. It was dark and she wanted to make sure Emma got home safely. "Don't forget, we have Laura's Murder Mystery evening after the match tomorrow. I hope you have your costume ready?"

"I do, and I can't wait to see who you are coming as."

"It's a secret, we're under strict instructions not to tell. The only person who knows is Laura, as she sent out the invites. The only clue is that she said she picked the characters to be as far

removed from the actual person as possible."

"Do you think she got yours right?"

"Oh, I hope so." Gill said seriously.

Emma laughed, "I can't wait to see."

"Night, Emma." Gill waited until her friend was inside the building, and saw a light go on in Emma's flat, before pulling out of the back street and driving the short distance home down the Royal Mile.

The following afternoon saw Dunedin ladies cruise to a comfortable win against a team three divisions below them. A nine nil scoreline in hockey was comprehensive enough without being humiliating and Dunedin ladies had done their best to keep it that way. Five goals up at half time, they had withdrawn their top players and left them on the sideline for the second half. After match teas were a quiet affair with all members of the first team heading to Laura's house as soon as the opposition team left.

"Gillian, are you leaving your car?"

Gill looked at Jane Dodds, "Ah, that depends on how everyone is getting to Laura's. Do you need a lift?"

"No actually, I was hoping to offer you one. I live near Laura's house, but don't want to walk alone from my house to hers, I was wondering if you might accompany me?"

Gill looked around the table, wondering what arrangements everyone else was making. Hilary rolled her eyes, "You go with Jane, I'll give Emma a lift to Laura's."

Gill shrugged, "Looks like you have an escort, Jane." Gill smiled, picked up her bag, and followed the austere woman to her car. Sitting comfortably in the cream leather passenger seat, Gillian took in the woman next to her. Jane Dodds was a woman of few words. She didn't believe in waste, which made her perfectly suited to the corporate acquisition job she did. "How's work?"

Jane's face remained passive as she spoke. "Busy, liquidation is a serious business, particularly in the current climate."

"I'm sure." Gill peeked again at Jane, taking in what this woman wore as casual clothing. A pair of designer trousers accompanied by high-heeled court shoes and a cashmere cardigan. An expensive watch sat on her pale wrist, platinum to match her wedding band. Gillian took in her

own jeans and long sleeved t-shirt, a pair of converse trainers on her feet. This was casual as far as Gillian was concerned.

Jane parked in her driveway and invited Gillian into her townhouse whilst she dropped off her hockey kit and picked up her outfit for the evening. Gillian followed the woman into her home, immediately taken by its size and neatness. There wasn't a speck of dust anywhere. Jane dropped her kitbag into a utility room then led Gillian upstairs to the main living area.

"Have a seat in the front drawing room and I'll get you a glass of wine."

"Thanks." Gill didn't protest. She simply did as asked and waited for Jane to return.

Putting the glasses of white wine on coasters, Jane sat next to Gillian on a large chesterfield sofa. Gill politely sipped her wine and nodded while Jane attempted to make small talk. It clearly wasn't her forte, but Gillian had to commend her for trying.

"So Paul has had to fly to Texas on short notice to sort out the entire mess."

Gillian recalled meeting the man once, last year. He was a classic looking city lawyer in his navy pinstripe suit and brogues. That's all she could recall.

"I think he is having an affair with his secretary."

Gill coughed as her wine went down the wrong way, she hadn't expected to hear that. Jane never spoke about anything personal. "I'm sorry to hear that." Gill managed to squeak.

Jane waved away Gill's attempt at sympathy. "She will only be the latest in a long line of many. Paul has never been much for fidelity."

"You don't mind?"

"I gave up minding a long time ago. I miss the sex though."

Gill simply nodded as she watched the way Jane ran a well-manicured nail around the tip of her wineglass. The woman looked at Gillian and sighed, "Perhaps we should be going?"

Gill nodded and stood up. Carrying her half empty glass of wine, she followed Jane in the direction of her kitchen. Jane deposited her glass on a black marble worktop and Gillian reached around the slim woman to deposit her glass there as well, effectively trapping her. Jane Dodds immediately stiffened and then gasped as Gillian pushed her hips into the woman's backside and then stood motionless. Jane had a white knuckle grip on her worktop, her breathing quickening as her arousal heightened with the feel of Gillian pressed right up against her. Gillian slowly ran her hands up the front of the cashmere top and captured Jane's small breasts through the thin material, causing the woman to groan with pleasure.

"Is this what you want?" Gill whispered hotly in her ear, as one of her hands moved down

towards the waistband of Jane's dress trousers. Jane shivered involuntarily as Gill lowered the zip of her slacks and slid her hand inside the silk underwear. "So wet."

Jane jerked in response to Gill's talented fingers as they skilfully found her clitoris, smearing it with the woman's own juices, making it slippery and hard.

"Oh, God."

Gill continued to stroke Jane until she came, bent over her kitchen worktop, her head lying next to her fruit bowl. Removing her wet fingers, liberally coated with Jane's juices, Gill slowly moved them towards the panting woman in front of her. Jane's eyes widened as Gill brought her coated fingers to her parted lips. Smearing Jane's lips with her own essence, Gill encouraged the woman to suck on them, while she used her spare hand to undo the button of Jane's trousers. Jane began to suck more voraciously in anticipation of what was to come.

"I'm going to fuck you," Gillian stated, and in one quick movement she yanked down Jane's trousers and panties, then swiftly entered her with the two fingers Jane had just been sucking on. The woman groaned with satisfaction as Gill pumped two then three fingers inside her. Within minutes the normally stoic woman was coming loudly, her groans echoing in the tiled kitchen. Gillian holding her firmly, assisting her to remain upright as her legs turned to rubber.

A few minutes later Gillian was washing her hands in the kitchen sink. "Shall we get going then?"

Jane rose shakily from her kitchen worktop, sated and dazed. Something she would only realise later, after her sex addled brain was finally able to recall exactly what had happened, was that she was still longing for one other thing. A kiss from another woman.

Jane and Gillian were the last guests to arrive at Laura's house, which was less than a five-minute walk from Jane's place.

"Come on, you two, hurry up and get changed, everyone is in the sitting room waiting," Laura chastised as they walked into her home. "The first bedroom upstairs on the right."

Gill watched as Jane put on what could only be described as a tramp's outfit. She knew that would raise a few laughs, as it was such a big change for the normally well-dressed Jane Dodds. Gillian pulled on her own outfit and wished she had made a better selection for her shoes. She glanced down at the stack of footwear, which had been left by her teammates and spotted the perfect pair. A flat soled brown brogue. Gill slipped her stockinged foot into one and it fit perfectly. Pulling her hair into a ponytail, she added the finishing touch, a pair of round-rimmed spectacles, and she was in character. The pair then went downstairs and walked into the room to howls of laughter. It looked like everyone had put a lot of thought into their outfit for the evening. Gill included.

"Where on earth did you get the clothes, Gillian?" Laura asked.

"I drove up to Morningside and went to one of the charity shops. I knew I would find tweed up there."

Gill's character was a wallflower librarian, and she really looked the part. Taking in the rest of the room, she spotted Emma who was in a top hat and tails and Hilary, who was wearing a cocktail dress from the 1920's, her character being the local celebrity singer.

"The shoes are fantastic. They go so well with your outfit."

Everyone looked at the footwear in question, and agreed, well almost everyone.

"Those are mine!" Linda declared, not in the least bit impressed.

"Ah yeah, I found them in the room upstairs, I thought they went well."

"That's not funny, Gillian."

Gill rolled her eyes, "It's only a pair of shoes and, you have to admit, they do go great with the outfit."

"Those are my good shoes!"

"I'm not saying there is anything wrong with them."

There were a few laughs in the room and Laura intervened. "Gill, I think the point Linda is making, is that those are her good shoes for a Saturday night and you now have them on your feet to complete your look as a wallflower librarian."

This caused outright laughter amongst the players, so Gill made a further attempt to pacify Linda. "Don't worry, I will look after them, and they go great with your jeans, it just so happens they have that old fashioned style to them that goes great with older clothes too."

"Shut up, Gill, you're not helping your cause," Hilary remarked.

"You can keep them on, but look after them."

"Will do."

The Murder Mystery evening got underway, with everyone staying in character until it was over. There was a break for food and Gillian made a beeline for the buffet table.

"I see you've worked up quite an appetite."

Gill nodded to Hilary as she bit into another barbecued chicken wing.

"Jane is glowing, I don't think I've ever seen her looking so *relaxed*." Hilary didn't look pleased as she made the comment.

Gill shrugged and nodded as she placed more food on her plate. "Jane's okay."

Sometime later, with the Murder finally solved, the evening began to draw to a close and people were starting to head home. Emma decided it was time to leave and was joined by both Hilary and Gillian. Jane asked if Gillian would walk her back home and all four players ended up taking the five-minute walk back to Jane's townhouse.

"Well, goodnight, girls." Jane gave Gillian a longing look, but the younger woman didn't bite, instead giving Jane a quick hug.

"I'll see you at training on Tuesday."

The three remaining players waited until the disappointed looking Jane was safely inside her house and the door closed behind her. "What the hell was that, Gillian?" Hilary asked.

Gill shrugged, "I don't know, her husband is away, maybe she is lonely."

"So she wants *you* to stay and keep her company?"

"I don't know."

"What happened earlier?"

"We dropped her car off, she picked up her costume and we walked to Laura's."

"Nonsense, you fucked her didn't you?"

Gill frowned, "Language, Hilary."

"Language my arse. You fucked her earlier, no wonder she had that dazed look and was flirting with you all evening."

"Rubbish." Gill didn't want to have this conversation with Hilary in front of Emma.

"Is there a member of the team you haven't fucked?"

Gill looked at Hilary and Emma became very interested in the answer Gill would provide. There was a brief stand off between the two friends before Gillian replied, "I never kiss and tell." Gill's eyes never left Hilary's.

This answer seemed to deflate the doctor and her eyes lowered for a moment. "I apologise, it's

none of my business." Gill watched as Hilary walked off in the direction of the main road. She turned to look at Emma for an answer to what had happened. The Irishwoman simply rolled her eyes and shook her head at Gillian, before setting off after Hilary, leaving Gill standing there, wondering what had happened. She stared at the townhouse, contemplating ringing the doorbell, but she wasn't in the mood after having words with Hilary and, instead set off in the direction of her teammates.

Chapter 13

"How's Hilary?"

Emma kept in step with Gillian as they jogged around the perimeter of the playing fields on a wet Tuesday evening. "She's fine, I had lunch with her today."

"Is she talking to me?"

"Honestly, Gillian, that's something for you and her to sort out."

"But I don't know what I've done wrong." Gill said with more than a hint of frustration.

Emma kept looking straight ahead as they reached a steep incline and she considered what she should or could tell Gillian. They were friends, but it wasn't her place to reveal anything personal about Hilary. "You need to open your eyes, Gillian."

Gill momentarily lost the pace as she thought about that, before quickly speeding up to catch Emma. "What on earth does that *mean*? I'm not very good with cryptic, I need to be told straight out."

"Hilary is attracted to you!" Emma whispered harshly, hating herself for having to reveal that information to the hapless Gillian.

Gill stared open mouthed at Emma. Her focus and co-ordination gone, she tripped over her own feet and hit the ground. Emma stopped and stared right back at her, wondering if she had fainted. Gill got to her feet and walked towards her. "Are you sure?" she asked, as she attempted to wipe the mud from her hands onto her tracksuit.

The Irish woman studied Gillian and came to the conclusion that there really was no malice or deceit in her; she genuinely didn't see what was right in front of her eyes. Emma had given some thought to the argument between the pair on Saturday night. Gillian was something of an enigma. If Hilary was correct, she had slept with Jane Dodds before the party and it left Emma wondering if Gill had, at some point, also slept with Hilary. The usually unflappable doctor had

clearly been jealous although Gillian seemed totally oblivious to that fact. Emma had spotted the signs even before the events of that evening. When she had caught up with Hilary, the doctor had revealed her feelings to Emma, convinced that Gillian was already aware of them but, clearly, that was not the case, until now, when Emma had let the cat out of the bag and told her. "Gillian, I'm sure."

"I think the world of Hilary, but I've never thought about her *that* way. She's my friend and, as I said, I don't sleep with my friends."

Emma wanted to clarify that Gillian had never slept with Hilary, but that wasn't her business. Now she was becoming as confused as Gillian. She had assumed that the young woman flirted with every woman she met and saw them all as a potential conquest. She hadn't realised Gillian was so selective when it came to her choice of bedmate. "I don't know what else to tell you," said Emma. "No one can legislate for the way they feel about someone else. Attraction isn't something we have control over."

When training ended, Gill sought out Hilary as they were leaving the pitch. She wanted to have a quiet word with her and out here, in the open, was often the best place to get privacy in such a big club. "Hey, Hilary."

"Hi, Gill, how are you?" It was the first time they had spoken since Saturday night and Hilary was feeling a little sheepish over her outburst.

"I'm fine, I just wanted to apologise for the other evening."

"You have nothing to apologise for, Gill."

Gillian was struggling, trying to find the right words. The place had become eerily quiet, as the last of the stragglers had made their way off the pitch. The pair were left standing under the floodlights, the sound of the raindrops seeming to count out the seconds as the silence dragged between them. "I ah, I'm sorry I'm such an idiot."

Hilary shook her head, "No, Gillian, you're not an idiot."

"I hadn't realised, you know?" Gill gestured helplessly.

Hilary sighed, "I'm attracted to you, but I don't want to be with you, in fact it irritates the hell out of me that I am."

"Oh."

"Well, you're a shit, a loveable one, but a shit all the same." Hilary softened her words with a grin and a soft punch to Gill's shoulder.

Gill grabbed Hilary and hugged her. Hilary hesitated for a moment, before wholeheartedly

returning the embrace. They stood there hugging each other until Gill felt a soft kiss on the top of her head, and she held Hilary all the tighter.

Emma unlocked her bike, watching the two women embracing at the edge of the pitch in the pouring rain. She laughed when she saw Hilary trip Gillian and wrestle her to the ground. Gill really did bring out the playful side in people.

Gill lay on her back on the wet Astroturf, Hilary lying beside her, both breathing heavily after their wrestling. "We would be terrible together, Hill's."

"I know, especially since you can't keep your pants on."

"I've never had a proper girlfriend, I just don't think it's in me." Gill defended herself.

Hilary looked up at the black sky; she couldn't disagree. "It's certainly not in you at the moment."

"We could, you know, if you want to?"

Hilary frowned and looked at Gill. "Are you offering me a sympathy fuck?"

"Trust me, there wouldn't be any sympathy involved." Gill grinned at Hilary, her eyes dancing.

Hilary pounced on Gill, straddling her and pinning her arms to her sides. Gillian struggled, then relaxed, and smiled sexily up at Hilary, causing the doctor to immediately get up off her. "Stop it."

Gillian jumped to her feet. "I'm sorry, Hilary, I just can't seem to help myself."

Hilary shook her head. "And that's the problem, you really can't. I know I could sleep with you right now, but it would mean nothing to you. Tomorrow you would be exactly the same as you are today. You don't have meaningful sex and that's what I want."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop apologising. It's not your fault." It was hard for Hilary to be angry at Gillian. She really hadn't done anything wrong. "You don't have to apologise for not returning my feelings, or for being yourself."

Gill again hugged Hilary, "But you matter to me."

Hilary laughed, despite the strangeness of the situation. "What a pair we are." The floodlights started to dim, casting them both in darkness. Hilary patted Gill on the back, "Come on, let's get out of the rain."

Gillian drove straight home, not bothering to shower at the club, opting instead for a warm bath

to ease her aching muscles and chilled bones. Stripping off her damp clothing, she watched as the bath filled with hot water. Sitting on the toilet seat, deep in thought, she wondered how she could have missed something so obvious. Did she want to date Hilary? It wasn't something she had ever considered before now, but the only answer she had for herself was that she could easily have gone to Hilary's bed tonight. That was it. Hilary was absolutely right; she loved women but the problem was that Gillian didn't seem to be capable of loving just one.

Gill turned off the taps and gingerly sank down into the hot water with a sigh. She didn't feel good about herself right at that moment. Hilary's words, not harsh, but true, resonated with her, leaving her feeling a little ashamed of her behaviour on Saturday night. Jane Dodds was a woman who had been looking for sex, so Gill had obliged. She dipped her head under the bathwater, no longer wanting to analyse her behaviour.

The following evening Gill and Emma went out for something to eat, with Gill's head still full of thoughts of Hilary and the weekend.

"Something wrong with your food?"

Gill sighed as she pushed a piece of Balmoral chicken aside. "The food's fine."

"You're very quiet."

"I'm just a little preoccupied with the events of the last few days."

"Do you feel bad about the situation with Hilary?"

"I do, I really like Hilary and I had no idea how she felt about me. All this time she has been watching me do, you know, what I do and I didn't realise it was hurting her." Gill fiddled with her food again, before laying down her fork. "I hadn't considered before now that my behaviour could be hurting anyone."

"What about the women who are married?"

"You mean their husbands?"

"Yes."

"I know what you're saying, but that's their decision to make. They are the ones in a relationship, if they choose to sleep with someone else, that's up to them."

"I couldn't do that."

"I know." Gillian studied Emma more closely. "Is that what happened back in Dublin?"

"Yes, my partner was seeing someone else."

"I'm sorry."

"Really?" Emma asked, sounding a little bitter.

"Genuinely. While I may sleep with people who have a partner, I never chase them. It's something they have decided to do. If it wasn't with me, it would be with someone else. I am sorry that your ex partner made that choice."

"Thank you."

Gill studied Emma, wondering what was going on behind the woman's guarded eyes. "Are you angry with the other woman?"

Emma thought about that. "I was angry with both of them."

"You don't like her?"

"She slept with my partner."

Gill nodded, "So you don't approve of what I do?"

"We're friends, Gillian. That's part of who you are, I'm not judging."

"But you wouldn't do it?"

"I wouldn't sleep with a person I knew had a partner and I would be horrified and angry if I was dating someone who turned out to be in a relationship already."

"You're a good person, Emma."

Emma shook her head, "Like I said, I don't judge you, Gillian, these are my choices and values, I don't expect others to have them."

Gill considered what Emma was saying; she had more questions. "You would expect this in a partner?"

"When it comes to relationships I go in for the long haul. I don't date someone unless I genuinely think there is a chance that we could have something meaningful and lasting together. The concept of sleeping with someone simply to have sex is an anathema to me." Emma noticed the blank look on her friend's face, and smiled, "You don't get it."

"I don't get the concept of being with one person forever."

"What about your parents?"

"Yeah, they have been together forever. I'm not saying it can't be, I'm saying..." Gill stopped to give her answer serious consideration and Emma waited patiently. "I don't know what it feels like to be intimate with someone and want them that way." Gill seemed to shock herself with the answer she gave. "Wow, that's interesting."

Emma smiled, "You're just not ready to settle down, or perhaps you haven't met that person that makes you want to give up everything for them. One day, Gillian, you'll fall head over heels and you won't know what's hit you."

Gill laughed, not able to imagine the scenario. "We have a free weekend coming up, I'm going to Auchterarder with Justine and Charlotte. We've rented a beautiful cottage, you're more than welcome to join us?"

"Oh, that sounds lovely, but I'm going back to Dublin for a visit. It will be my first time back since moving here."

"You looking forward to catching up with friends and family?"

Emma nodded, "Yes, I've missed them."

"I hope you have a really nice time."

"Thanks. Gillian, I hope so too." Emma took a final forkful of her food, chewing and swallowing, before continuing. "Now that you seem to be more chatty, what is the stuffing in this chicken, it's wonderful, really spicy."

"Oh, that's haggis with whisky."

Emma looked horrified and Gill laughed. "I swore I would never eat haggis. I've been tricked!"

Gill shrugged, "You can't say it isn't tasty." She gave her trademark cheeky grin and Emma laughed, her distaste at having accidentally eaten haggis gone.

Chapter 14

Early November saw the Dunedin ladies travel to Glasgow to face one of their toughest tests of the season. Glasgow ladies weren't just giants of the Scottish scene, they were one of the top teams in Europe, winning a bronze club medal last season, and they boasted no fewer than seven Scottish Internationals. Currently top of the league, it was going to be a tough task for Dunedin to take anything from the game, but they wanted nothing less than a point.

As the team walked through the modern sports centre they heard pop music playing throughout the corridors and changing rooms of the complex. The team stopped on the floor overlooking the Astroturf pitch. It was pouring with rain; a cold wet Glasgow afternoon. You could barely see ten yards either side of the pitch due to the constant drizzle. Gillian was eating a banana, her usual pre match sustenance, as she swore it kept cramp at bay.

Hilary shivered, "It doesn't exactly look inviting, does it?" There were a few mumbles of agreement.

Gillian was nodding her head in time with the music; she loved the rain. She started singing, using her banana as a microphone. "Let's get excited, I'm so excited, I know exactly what I'm gonna do." Laura joined in and the pair were soon dancing unabashedly in the sports centre with their teammates looking on and laughing.

"My ladies, you gotta get in the game." Gillian continued, stirring up her teammates.

Emma shook her head and smiled at her friend, Gillian really was a lot of fun. With the players buoyant and the team talk over, the starting eleven were stripped down to their uniforms and ready for action. Scott had a few final words of wisdom. "This is a big test, any kind of point today would be fantastic. Remember, you are a good unit. They have individuals who can hurt us, but our strength is in our team work." He stopped as his attention was caught by one of two gentlemen walking down the stairs.

"Who's that?" Gill asked.

Camilla 'Cammo' Cameron answered her question. "That's Rob Slater, the Great Britain women's hockey coach."

"Ok-ay."

A few of the players watched the new arrival with interest. Especially Cammo and Laura who were currently in the Scottish squad. They knew he was here to watch the Scottish internationals with one eye on the future GB team for the 2012 Olympic games in London.

"Let's hope some of the opposition freeze with nerves then." Gill added.

Emma burst out laughing and Gill shrugged, "You never know, it might change what they do on the pitch and, hopefully, it will work to our advantage. She looked at Cammo and Laura, "You two play your usual game and keep it tight, we need you to be on top form today."

The pair nodded, knowing it was both an opportunity for them personally and, if Gill was right, for the team as well. "Let's go then, Ladies!" Scott clapped his hands as he shouted encouragement and the Dunedin team made their way to the pitch.

With ten minutes to go, the score was level at two goals each and Dunedin ladies were under intense pressure. The rain hadn't let up all game and everyone was soaked through, but the Glasgow ladies had been as relentless as the rain and Dunedin needed to soak up the pressure for the last remaining minutes.

"Melinda!" Gill shouted to the teenager. "Stand at the top of the opposition D, right in front of the goalkeeper. Try to pick up any ball that we clear out of defence. You're running the entire back line, give it everything you've got. The rest of us are defending deep. Let's hope we can get a breakaway."

The youngster nodded and took up the position Gill had specified. Gill knew it was a big ask, but they needed to have an outlet, no matter how slim a chance it was. Gill herself dropped deeper to assist her team and break up play, trying to disrupt some of the momentum Glasgow had built up in wave after wave of attack as they searched for the winning goal. With only a minute left Glasgow were awarded yet another penalty corner when the ball struck a Dunedin player's foot in the D. Gill stood behind the goal line with the other defenders, her back foot on Hilary's to give her extra purchase to rush out and stop Glasgow getting a shot in on goal.

"Out!" Came the call from Lindy in goal and Gill was off, with a firm push on the back from Hilary to help send her on her way. She saw the Glasgow player trap the ball with her stick. It was perfect and the ball sat motionless on the turf waiting to be struck. But the opposition striker wasn't set. Something in their routine was amiss and the striker had to adjust her feet to get into place. Gill was already there as the striker's stick was raised and, before the opposition player could unleash her swing, Gill had pounced on the ball. Nothing in her mind but sprinting flat out towards the opposition goal. She had five players to beat, but knew exactly where Melinda was. She opened up the face of her stick to chip the ball and sent it soaring through the air, back over the heads of the onrushing defenders. Gill's pace and momentum easily took her past them as they tried to stop and change direction. She watched as Melinda collected the bouncing ball on the right hand side of the goal and then drove along the back line towards the keeper. Gill was screaming for the ball as she tore into the D. Melinda cut the ball back for her and, leaving the goalkeeper stranded, Gill swept the ball into the empty goal with a resounding thud as it hit the backboard.

Gill lay flat out on the turf breathing heavily after her exertions, her mouth wide open, a large grin on her face, screaming, "Yesssssss!" for all she was worth. The first player to congratulate her was Melinda, who literally jumped on top of Gillian in her enthusiasm to celebrate with her teammate. It was only a few seconds before the rest of the team arrived and joined in. The umpire struggled to get the Dunedin team to cut short their celebrations and get the game underway for the final few seconds. Gill was the last player up and received a green card; she couldn't have cared less. It was a small price to pay for the win. No more than a slap on the wrist.

Back in the changing room the mood amongst the Dunedin players was one of jubilation. This was their best win to date and it was sure to make waves throughout Scottish hockey circles. The players peeled off their soaking wet kit and threw it onto the floor creating a big pile of wet clothing.

"Let's just get it into bin bags and then throw it into someone's washing machine. Any volunteers?" Sheila asked.

"I'll take the tops," Cammo offered.

"Skirts for me," said Hilary.

"Come on, someone has to take the socks." Sheila looked around, "If I don't get a volunteer, I'll delegate." She waited, but there was no volunteer. "Gillian, you're doing the socks."

"What? Come on, no way."

"Actually, that's not a good idea, the socks are white, they won't be after Gillian washes them." Jane Dodds pointed out.

"Remember how she managed to shrink our last set of shirts." Camilla added.

"I tumble dried them, I don't have anywhere to hang them out." Gill protested.

"I'll take the socks," Emma volunteered.

"But you don't have a car." Sheila pointed out.

"I'll drive the socks," Gillian offered.

"Good grief, is that it over then?" Jane added, about to lose her patience.

Gill looked to Emma and shrugged with a grin, "Yeah. I'm driving Emma home anyway and I'll pick up the socks from her on Tuesday."

Jane picked up her shower gel and shampoo and was walking to the showers when a wet sock hit her on the back of the head. The changing room went quiet as the austere woman turned around with a look of fury on her face. Her eyes met the playful, grinning pair of Gillian Rae's and her look softened. "You are a shit, Gillian," the refined woman stated, all the while standing naked at the entrance to the showers. The place erupted into laughter.

Monday morning brought with it a crisp frost. Gill decided to make an early start to her day, still on a high from Saturday's win. The school car park was relatively quiet when she pulled in just after eight a.m. Gill was the first member of the PE staff to arrive and put the kettle on. Popping a couple of teabags into the teapot, she readied some cups in expectation of the other staff members' arrival. She was sitting, casually sipping her morning cuppa, when Dennis Carter, the head of the PE department, entered the staff room.

"So, will you be playing for England soon?" He asked.

Gill lowered the cup from her mouth, a look of utter confusion on her face. "What?"

Dennis held up one of the morning broadsheets, "Apparently the GB coach wants to include you in the squad and has said, if Scotland don't call you up, England will."

The tea was dribbling down the front of Gill's clean tracksuit as she stared dumbfounded at her boss. She finally noticed the mess she was making when she felt the warmth from the liquid and it brought her to her senses. "Can I see that?"

Dennis nodded slowly as he passed the paper to Gillian.

The first thing she noticed was the headline '*Scotland Player Set To Come In From The Cold...with a little help from England.*'

Former Scotland under 21 player, Gillian Rae, has been frozen out of Scottish hockey since the age of eighteen, due to twice breaking curfew whilst on international duty. Since then, Scotland have repeatedly refused calls to cap the player at any level despite her increasingly regular top star performances for Dunedin ladies. No one was available at the Scottish Hockey Union to comment on the situation, but Rob Slater, former England coach and current coach of the Great Britain women's hockey squad, has called the situation a travesty.

"For a player of Gillian Rae's quality to be frozen out of International hockey for a misdemeanour that occurred when she was eighteen years old is bizarre. After watching her at the weekend, I enquired as to why she wasn't a Scottish international. When informed as to the reason she wasn't being picked, I immediately alerted the current England coach and asked him to look into her eligibility. If Scotland don't want her, England will."

When asked what would happen if she wasn't eligible for England, and Scotland continued to refuse to pick her, he said: "At the very least she will be invited to join the Great Britain training squad. We are building towards the London Olympics and we need the best players from England, Scotland and Wales. Gillian Rae is definitely a player of immense talent."

After these quotes from Rob Slater, the pressure will once again be on the Scottish selectors to reconsider their stance, or face the potential embarrassment of having one of Scotland's best assets turning out for England and Great Britain."

Gill was very surprised by the article and, barring a couple of lines it was very positive, although she didn't know what to make of the idea of her turning out for England. She looked to her boss with raised eyebrows, "What would you think of me playing for your country, Dennis?"

He smiled kindly, "I'd be proud to see you pull on an England shirt, but you'd better take a look at this first." He handed her one of the daily tabloids.

A Jolly Old Scandal

Edinburgh PE teacher Gillian Rae is at the centre of a tug of war between the Scottish and English hockey unions. One wants to select her, while the other refuses to because of infractions committed whilst Ms Rae was playing for the Scottish under 21's as an eighteen year old. She has never been selected for any Scottish squad since. So just what did the twenty-five year old teacher get up to? Firstly, she broke curfew twice, but the final straw came when she was caught in flagrante delicto with a member of the Italian ladies under 21 squad.

One thing is for certain; the unmarried teacher will be invited to join the Great Britain squad regardless of who selects her. Ms Rae, a teacher at Castlerock High School, was unavailable for comment.

Gill looked at Dennis, "I've just been outed in a national newspaper."

Dennis Carter nodded, "It won't be long before it's all over the school."

The telephone rang, interrupting their conversation. Gill listened as Dennis spoke on the phone, she knew it was about her.

"That was the headmaster, he'd like to see you in his office."

"Right now?"

Dennis looked sympathetically at the young woman. This wasn't going to be pretty. "Come back and see me when he's finished with you."

Gillian made her way over to the Headmaster's office, dreading having to meet with the cantankerous man. She walked into the entrance that housed the secretaries, who looked at her with a mixture of sympathy and curiosity. Just as she was about to knock on the headmaster's door, Maggie McLure's door opened instead and an arm popped out and pulled her inside.

"First assault and now kidnap?" Gillian joked.

"This is no time for jokes, Gillian." Maggie said sternly. "Do you know what's going to happen when you go into his office?"

"I'm assuming I'm going to get a bit of a dressing down."

"He is going to suspend you pending the result of a full enquiry."

"What!"

"How many lesbian PE teachers do you know?"

Gill frowned, "Loads."

"Exactly, but no one ever mentions it. We all know that there are a good few in our schools, but no one wants to state the obvious. You have brought it right out into the open!"

"It's not like I meant to." Gill defended.

Maggie sighed, genuinely feeling for Gill in this situation. "This is what you do. You will go in there and he will suspend you indefinitely on full pay. There will be a hearing sometime soon, probably within the next two weeks, so you get straight on to your union rep, she's very good. You make no comment to anyone, especially the newspapers. You keep your head down and do *not* go to any bars."

Gill looked shell-shocked. "Will I get to come back to work after the enquiry?"

"As long as they don't find anything untoward, yes, you will."

"Like what?" Gill was close to panic.

"Gill, calm down, they need to make sure the female pupils will be safe around you."

"What!" Gill practically screamed.

"Keep it down. I know, but the school have to be seen to be investigating the matter fully."

"I'm a lesbian. Not a paedophile!"

"We all know that."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure, but I'm not the one that's investigating you."

Gill paced in Maggie's office, gesturing with her hands towards the headmaster's room. "Is he homophobic?"

Maggie didn't answer that question. "All it needs is for a disgruntled pupil to say something, Gill."

"There is nothing, Maggie, absolutely *nothing*." Gill was close to tears. "My teaching career could be over."

"I'm sure it won't come to that." Maggie hugged the young woman who she had known since she was twelve years old. "You need to be stay strong, Gillian. I will do all I can from this end."

"Thanks, Maggie."

"Now hold your head up high and go see him."

Chapter 15

Emma was at the weekly meeting listening intently to her colleagues as they discussed patients with complications who were effectively blocking beds.

She sat watching as Hilary Duffy spoke. So different here from the playful woman she had got to know outside the hospital walls. Straight-framed glasses sat on an elegant nose, adding to Hilary's serious, professional, appearance. Everything about her instilled instant confidence in those around her.

"Moving on, I'd like to have Mrs. McCullough discharged by the end of the week. She should be responding to antibiotics by then, so her post-op infection can be managed by her GP." Hilary turned to the physio, "How is her mobility?"

"She's currently using a walking frame, I expect her to have progressed to walking sticks by Friday."

"Excellent." She turned to Emma, "OT home visit for Wednesday?"

Emma looked up from her notes, "Actually, I'd like to do a discharge home visit instead. The patient is agoraphobic and I don't want to take her home only to bring her back again to repeat the process on Friday. A discharge home visit will cut down on the stress involved for this patient."

Hilary pursed her lips and nodded, impressed, not for the first time, by Emma's thought process and attention to detail. "That's settled then, barring any further complications, the patient is yours to discharge on Friday."

When the meeting ended, Hilary hung back to grab a few words with Emma. "Have you heard from Gillian?"

"No, I've tried calling, but her mobile is switched off. She hasn't replied to any of my texts."

Hilary rubbed her forehead, "Same here. I actually went to her flat after work yesterday and, if she was there, she didn't answer."

"Hopefully she'll turn up for training tonight." Emma suggested.

Hilary shook her head. "I just don't know, it's a hellish situation."

There was no doubt about that, Emma thought. Poor Gillian, being selected for the Great Britain squad, outed in a national newspaper and suspended from work, all in the same day. Life really could be cruel. "How do you think she will be handling all this?"

"Truthfully, I can't imagine what she must be feeling. Perhaps she has gone to Justine's?"

"I hope so. I hate to think of her all alone in her flat."

"Me too. I honestly don't know how she will cope with this. In all the time I've known her she's always been the same upbeat and playful Gillian. I really have no idea how she will react to this."

Emma tried to imagine that too, but came up blank. "I'm also at a loss. It's so unfair, she has done nothing wrong."

"Bloody tabloids!" Hilary cursed, "They don't care whose life they wreck."

"What about her family? Will they support her?"

"I don't know, she doesn't talk about them."

Gillian and Hilary both stood in the room, feeling helpless and frustrated. "I better get going, I'll see you at training tonight?"

"I'll be there. Later, Emma."

Training that evening was abuzz with talk about Gillian, and Emma didn't think she was wrong in thinking there were women present that she had never seen before. There appeared to be enough women in attendance for six hockey squads, not just the four that Dunedin ladies turned out every Saturday.

"Look at them, here for the show. But it looks like the main attraction will be disappointing them," Sheila remarked to her teammates. "Has anyone seen or heard from Gillian?" There were a few shakes of the head and several 'no's' amongst the first team squad. "What a bloody mess, Gill doesn't deserve this."

Training got underway and an hour later it was obvious Gillian wasn't going to show. Emma had finally had enough and decided to cut her evening short an hour early. "I'm heading off, I'll see you all on Thursday night."

There were no surprised faces. The majority of the first team were feeling the same way and the

first hour had been a very subdued affair.

Hilary stopped Emma before she left the pitch. "Are you going to Gillian's?"

"Yes and, if she isn't home, I'm going to Justine's."

"Good. Let me know how you get on."

Twenty minutes later, Emma was standing outside Gillian's door ringing the buzzer, but there was no answer. Getting back on her bike she cycled the short distance down to Justine's flat.

Opening her front door, Justine looked concerned. "Emma, is everything okay with Gill?"

"I don't know, I haven't heard from her, neither has anyone else at the club. I was hoping she was here."

Justine shook her head, "No. She's at her flat."

"But I've just come from there, no one answered. Hilary tried last night too."

"Trust me, she's home."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, it's what she does. She will be in there."

"Have you heard from her?"

"One text on Monday afternoon. It simply said, be in touch soon, don't worry."

"What do you suggest I do?"

Justine looked at Emma as she considered her answer. "If you really want to see her, get inside the main entrance and bang her front door down."

And that's exactly what Emma was doing less than fifteen minutes later. She had waited outside Gillian's stair door until someone was leaving and simply walked in. Now she was banging on Gill's door and shouting through her letterbox.

"I know you're in there, Gillian! Open up. I'm not leaving until I see you."

Bang! Bang! Bang! Ding-dong.

"I'll keep this up all night if I have to." And she did just that for the next ten minutes, ignoring several roars from Gillian's neighbours, until finally the door flew open.

"Come in, you mad Irishwoman!"

Emma was initially surprised and stood staring at Gill.

"Well? Are you coming in?" Gill walked away from the door, but left it open.

Emma scurried after her and found Gill in the sitting room, lying on the sofa watching television. An open pizza box lay next to her, with two full slices and crusts in it. Several empty beer bottles were on the coffee table.

"You weren't at training."

Gill shrugged as she took another drink from her beer. "I didn't feel up to it."

"How are you doing, Gillian?" It seemed an unnecessary question, given the circumstances. A quick glance at Gillian and her surroundings was enough to confirm that the young woman wasn't doing well. Gill continued to stare at the television, her bare feet up on the sofa as she stretched out, her face lacking any kind of telling expression.

She gave Emma a quick glance, "I'm fine."

Emma sighed as she sat on a nearby chair. "There are lots of people worried about you."

Gill didn't look away from the screen. "No need to be."

Emma stood up and went over to switch the television off.

"I was watching that." Gill complained.

"Not anymore."

She shrugged, "Want a beer? Some pizza?"

"No thank you."

"Suit yourself."

"Have you actually moved from that sofa since yesterday?"

Gill stretched her arms behind her head and looked at the ceiling. "Toilet, kitchen and deliveries."

Emma sighed, "I'm sorry about what's happened, Gillian."

Gill gave a laugh that held no humour. "Shouldn't you be congratulating me on my call up?" She

pointed a slightly wonky finger towards Emma, "Though, admittedly, I don't know exactly who will be calling me up yet. England, Wales, maybe even the actual country of my birth, who knows." Gill threw up her hands histrionically in mid air.

Emma decided Gillian was drunker than she had first thought. "I'm going to make coffee."

"Help yourself."

In the kitchen Emma found several more empty beer bottles littered around the kitchen worktops. She opened the fridge and noticed there were even more full bottles, chilled and waiting for Gillian. Filling the kettle with water, Emma prepared two cups for coffee.

Emma set a cup of strong coffee down next to Gillian.

Gill indicated her bottle of beer, "I'm alright thanks."

"Gillian, you need to stop drinking. Get a shower and some fresh clothes and have a good night's sleep."

"And why would I want to do that? It's not like I can go anywhere. You, on the other hand, need to get to bed. You have work in the morning. Me, I can suit myself and, since I can't go to a bar, I'm sitting around here drinking beer and watching porn." Gill flicked the television back on to do just that. She turned to Emma, "You're welcome to stay or go, it's up to you."

Emma was infuriated with Gillian. She watched as the other woman settled back on the sofa with her beer in hand and watched two women having sex on the telly. "You're being rude, Gillian."

"You're welcome to leave."

Emma was up off the chair before she even thought about what she was doing. She stood over Gillian, "You are wallowing in self pity. There are people who care about you, have been trying to contact you. Yes, what's happened is shitty and you certainly don't deserve it, but you need to get your act together."

Gill got unsteadily to her feet. "Why? What's the point? I get up tomorrow and do what?"

"You can't just sit around drinking beer until you pass out!" Emma was so close Gillian could smell the sweat on her body from her earlier exertions. Her nostrils flared and before Emma knew what was happening, Gillian had captured her mouth and was kissing her hard and deep. Taken completely by surprise, Emma responded without thinking and gave into the kiss; it had been so long since she had been this close to another woman. She felt her back connect with the wall and Gillian's hands were moving under her top, massaging her breasts through her sports bra. When Gillian released her mouth to suck on her neck Emma came back to her senses and pushed Gill away. The back of drunken woman's knees collided with the sofa and she lost her balance and fell, ending up on her ass.

"You could have just asked me to stop." Gill remarked, as she struggled to get up.

Emma was breathing heavily, her chest heaving from a mixture of passion and anger. She had been so turned on for a few moments, but now she was angry at Gillian for her actions and at herself for her initial response and for not pushing her away sooner. "You need to sober up and grow up. Right now you are in a difficult situation, but you still have a life. You have done nothing wrong and should be reinstated as a teacher. On top of that you have now been recognised as one of the best players in the country. Not just Scotland, but the entire UK. Do you know what I think, Gillian?"

Gill said nothing, she simply sat where she had landed after Emma's push.

"You don't *want* it. This self destructive behaviour, I think it's some part of you making sure you never realise your full potential." And with those words rattling in Gillian's ears, Emma left.

Thursday evening training was crowded, but a little less congested than Tuesday night. Emma watched the car park, looking for the familiar silver car, but there was still no sign of it. She hated to think of Gillian still lying around in her flat, drinking herself into a stupor. She had spoken to Hilary on Wednesday morning, deliberately omitting the part where Gillian had kissed her. She wasn't sure what the doctor would think of that and still wasn't sure what to make of it herself. Gillian had been drunk, and she was always picking up women. But she was stuck at home and Emma had been there. She probably would have kissed any woman who crossed her doorstep that evening and that's what made Emma so angry about Gillian's actions. She walked over and joined her teammates. Tonight was going to be all about match tactics and, if Gillian wasn't going to be playing at the weekend, they would need to utilise every minute of the two hours available to them.

"Look, here's Gillian," said Sheila.

Emma looked towards the far side of the pitch and sure enough, there was Gillian walking towards them. A slow ripple went around the pitch as word quickly spread that Gill was here and then, quite spontaneously, members of the first team started to clap. Within seconds the sporadic clapping became applause as all the women present joined in. Gillian seemed to hesitate for a moment, caught unaware by the turn of events. She looked around at the faces present and a shy smile broke out on her face. She looked almost bashful, a trait Emma never imagined she would ever witness in Gillian Rae. As the applause died down, Sheila Muir took the time to say a few words.

"Ladies, I'm sure you will all join me in offering our congratulations to Gillian, the first member of Dunedin ladies to be called up for the Great Britain squad. Well done, Gill."

The cheers and applause rang out again, along with a few good-natured boos and jeers at the prospect of a Scottish woman turning out for England. Hilary took a moment to speak to her

friend. "Good to see you, Gill and congratulations." The pair hugged, "Don't worry, you will soon be yesterday's news."

"Thanks, I hope so."

Hilary patted Gill on the back. "This will be over soon."

Gill caught Emma's eye, the other woman nodding then looking away. Gill was drunk on Tuesday evening, but she remembered everything that had happened and she felt like a shit for treating Emma the way she had.

Training went well, it was a little difficult for Gill, but something she knew she had to do and get out of the way. Tuesday would be easier now, and Saturday's game would take care of itself. Life would go on, especially in a hockey sense; it was its own animal. People were replaced, people moved on or got injured; it was always changing. Work however, was a whole different matter and Gillian was dreading her hearing in a week's time.

"Hi, can I come in?"

Emma stood at her door, looking at the woman on the other side. She hadn't spoken a word to Gillian at training that evening and had cycled home immediately after it finished. She stood aside, allowing Gill into her flat.

"Can I get you something, a tea or coffee?"

"No thanks, I don't want to keep you."

"Have a seat."

Gill did as instructed, sitting opposite Emma. "I came here to apologise for my behaviour the other night."

"Which part?"

"All of it really, but in particular, I want to apologise for kissing you. That was out of order. I'm sorry."

Emma nodded. "Apology accepted."

"Thanks. Your friendship means a lot to me, I don't want to ruin it with my stupid, impulsive behaviour."

"You haven't. You are under a lot of pressure and you were drunk; which is not an excuse, but it

did contribute to your actions the other night."

"Thanks for being so understanding."

Emma had questions and now seemed as good a time as any to ask, "What do your parents say about everything that has happened?"

Gill smiled, "Nothing."

"I don't understand, aren't you close?"

"It's not about that, they love me, but they don't understand me."

"Your sexuality?" Emma clarified.

Gill sighed, normally she hated this kind of conversation, but Emma deserved an explanation, especially after the other night. "Let me try and explain it better. My dad is seventy-one and my mum is sixty-four. They didn't intend on having a twenty-five year old daughter at the age they are now. My mum was thirty-nine when she had me. I was a late baby and unexpected. Anytime I was troublesome, my mum would say, '*Gillian was a late baby*'. That was their explanation for everything. It was the same when I told them I liked girls. '*Oh, Gillian was a late baby.*' They both retired before I left high school, they are more like grandparents."

Emma nodded, beginning to get a picture of Gill's family life. "What about your sister?"

"Which one?"

"Oh, I didn't realise you had more than one."

"I have two older sisters and an older brother. I only really know Margaret. Kevin and Miriam emigrated years ago. She's in Australia and he's in Canada."

"Married?"

Gill nodded, "Kevin has three boys and Miriam has two girls and a boy. I hardly know any of them. I've met them all, but they have been gone so long. My brother's oldest is almost eighteen. All the kids have Australian and Canadian accents. Generally speaking, we're not a close family. My sister Margaret is the closest to me, but I'm not going to burden her with this, she's a busy woman."

"So, who do you have?"

"Justine, you, Hilary, Maggie McLure, my assistant head who taught me when I was twelve. I have people I can turn to. The thing is, right now, I mostly want to be alone, to just keep my head down."

"I can understand that."

There was a short silence between them, before Gill spoke. "I better get going, I have an early appointment with the gym tomorrow morning."

Emma smiled, delighted to hear that Gillian was putting her time to good use and focussing on her fitness instead of wallowing in self pity and drinking beer. "I'll see you Saturday."

"Night, Emma."

Chapter 16

"Well, well. Look who's turned up." Justine opened her arms and Gillian stepped willingly into her embrace. "How are you doing?" she asked, planting a soft kiss on the top of Gillian's head.

"I'm okay. I went to training last night and I've stopped drinking beer."

"How many days?"

"Three."

"Three days of drinking beer and lying on your sofa, not too bad."

"I watched porn too."

"I'm surprised it was only three days, then."

Gillian's eyes were closed as she enjoyed the simple pleasure of being hugged. She needed this.

"Come on, let's go to the living room, I wasn't sure if you would be coming tonight, but I saved you some dinner."

"Thanks, Justine, you're the best." Gill sat on the sofa, aware that something, or rather someone was missing. "Where's Charlotte?"

"She's staying overnight with my mum, I have a game in Aberdeen tomorrow."

Gill nodded, "What position are you in the league?"

"Third."

"Not bad."

"Stay here, I'll bring your dinner through."

Gillian ate what was her first proper meal of the week, mushroom risotto with a side salad and garlic bread. The two friends were virtually silent whilst Gillian devoured the food. "Thanks, Justine, that was amazing."

"You need to eat better, Gill."

"I know." Gill patted her full stomach as she relaxed on the sofa, Justine sitting next to her.

"Only you could manage to turn the most spectacular news into a complete disaster."

"It's not like I had any say in it. I never imagined that choices I made when I was eighteen would come back to haunt me seven years later."

"You will be back at work soon." It was a statement, not a question.

"I hope so, but we both know that all it takes is for one student to say something, it doesn't matter that it isn't true,"

"That won't happen."

"The thing is, Justine, even when I'm reinstated, this will always be hanging over me. If I say or do something a student doesn't like, they could create a false allegation against me. I'm wide open to blackmail and don't think there aren't kids who wouldn't do it."

"I know, Gillian." Justine was sympathetic to her friend's situation. Teaching school children would never be quite the same for Gill again. "But what can you do? The only other option is to leave and work in adult education."

Gill nodded and yawned, suddenly feeling tired.

"Don't forget, Gill, you have positive news here as well. You have been selected to join the Great Britain training squad. You need to seize this opportunity with both hands. There will be no one prouder than me when you walk out on that pitch to represent Great Britain at the next Olympics."

"Thanks, Justine." The pair shared a smile.

"It's a fantastic opportunity you have been handed, don't lose sight of that. I know you are going through a torrid time at the moment, but you deserve this call up. Promise me you will make the most of it. Even for one shot at the Olympics." Justine pleaded.

Gill was silent, Justine's words making her think back to Tuesday night. "Emma accused me of

deliberately messing up my chances of international hockey."

Justine's lips pursed. "Do you think she is right?"

Gillian fiddled with her belt buckle, flicking the end of the leather. "I think a part of me has enjoyed the status of being good enough to play for Scotland, but not being picked."

Justine stilled Gillian's hand, forcing her to look right into Justine's face, "Emma is a smart woman. You have a choice to make, Gill. Your bluff is being called. Are you ready to step up and play with the big girls, or will you waste this opportunity?"

Gill smiled ruefully, "You know me too well."

"Seems like I'm not the only one. The choice is yours, Gillian. You have the skill, that's not in question, but do you have the dedication and the discipline required to make it?"

"I kissed her."

Justine frowned, momentarily confused by the sudden change in the conversation. "I need you to clarify exactly who you kissed."

"Emma for goodness sake, I kissed Emma."

"And what happened?"

"She pushed me onto my backside."

"Sensible woman." Gill didn't answer causing Justine to wonder about her feelings. "You like her."

"Of course I do, we're friends."

"No, I mean you are attracted to her."

"Justine, I'm attracted to *lots* of women, but don't worry, I haven't ruined the friendship. I apologised for my behaviour and we're fine."

Justine was exasperated with her friend. "Why don't you ask Emma on a date? Try and do things properly, take it slowly."

"What would that involve?"

"Cinema, a meal, a walk along the beach."

"We do all that."

"That's my point, you could be dating."

"Justine, did you not hear me? She pushed me away."

"That's because you probably just kissed her out the blue."

Gill sighed, "I was drunk, I kissed and groped her."

Justine rolled her eyes, "Not all women want that."

"I know, but it's what I want."

"Do you want to be with Emma?" Justine was losing all patience with her friend.

"I want to sleep with her, but she's not that type of woman."

"You're a lost cause, Gillian."

"Maybe so."

Justine changed the subject, "Have you got a date set for your hearing?"

"Thursday morning."

"It will be fine," she said reassuringly. "You've done nothing wrong."

"I know, but I can't help but worry."

They sat in silence for a few minutes before Gill spoke again. "This is a bit of a wake up call you know. I think I need to be a bit more responsible. More mature."

Justine looked fondly at her friend. "Don't you go changing too much, Gillian, I love you the way you are."

Gillian laid her head on Justine's shoulder. "Oh thank goodness." They both laughed. "What's the movie for this evening, darling?"

"The Boat That Rocked, honey."

Gillian showed more interest. "Oh, is it porn?"

Justine hit Gill with a cushion from the sofa. "It's about sixties' pirate radio. You have a one track mind."

"Speaking of, how are things with Kenny?"

"Good."

"Do you love him?"

"I like him."

"I know that," Gillian said impatiently. "Do you *like* him more than you did, say two months ago?"

"Yes."

"Do you *love* him?"

"That's such a big word."

"Come on, Justine." Gillian chided, "I'm assuming you haven't declared your love to Kenny, but you can tell me. I can keep a secret."

Justine thought about it and Gillian only had to look at her face to know the answer.

"You should tell him."

"I will not!" Justine was indignant.

"Has he told you he loves you?"

"Not quite."

"This is so exciting, but I think you are right. Don't tell him until he tells you."

"I am not now, nor will I ever take romantic advice from you, Gillian Rae."

"Why? You try to give me advice all the time." Gill complained.

"Speaking of which, if you want a chance with Emma, you need to be patient. Not try to jump her bones at any opportunity."

"See what I mean? You are always giving me advice."

"Yeah, but when it comes to romance, I'm the only one of us who has any experience. You haven't got a romantic bone in your body."

"I do."

"Everything you do is geared towards sex."

Gillian looked blankly at Justine, wondering what her point was.

"Let's watch the movie, there is no hope for you, Gillian."

Less than an hour into the movie, Gillian was sound asleep, her head resting in Justine's lap. The blonde's fingers softly smoothing Gillian's hair. Justine knew that Gillian was a woman with a lot on her plate at the moment. Her fingers gently traced the two healing scars around Gill's left eye. She thought back to the evening she had first met Emma, just a few days after the injury, when Gill had brought her to dinner. Justine knew they could be good together, but she wasn't sure that Gillian could ever get her act together enough to prove to the Irishwoman that she was capable of having a serious relationship.

"Mmm, that's nice, don't stop."

Justine laughed softly. "You know, if you would take the time to get to know a woman better, she might just do stuff like this for you."

"Sshh, you're spoiling the moment. Can you keep doing it without talking?"

Justine pinched Gill in the ribs, causing her to yelp. She sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. "How long was I out?"

"About an hour."

Gill saw the credits rolling, indicating the end of the film. "Was it any good?"

"It was decent enough."

Gill stretched, "Sorry for falling asleep on you. I better get going, you have an early start tomorrow."

"Okay, Gill, promise you will call me on Thursday as soon as you are finished at the hearing."

"I promise."

"It's going to be fine."

"I hope so." Gill hugged Justine and they said goodnight. As she walked towards her car she briefly considered driving up to Edinburgh's pink triangle instead of home. But then the words of Maggie McLure rang in her ears and she thought better of it. Taking the short drive home, Gillian was restless, she checked the clock, it was ten minutes to eleven. Instead of parking at her flat Gill drove up to the junction and took the small road that led in behind the Royal Mile. She wasn't sure if Emma would be awake, but she wanted to see her. As she pulled into the nearest available parking space Gill looked up and saw a light on in the flat, but something else also caught her eye. She recognised the car to her left; it belonged to Hilary Duffy. There was no way Gill could visit Emma now and she wanted to get out of there before either of them saw her.

Driving the couple of hundred yards back down the road Gill parked her car and turned off the engine, but she couldn't bring herself to exit the vehicle. Instead she sat there staring at the back of a nearby hotel. Closing her eyes, Gill tried not to imagine Emma and Hilary together. Were they dating? Maybe they were just friends, sharing a meal. They certainly knew each other well, working in the same place and then playing for the same team. Gill knew they sometimes had lunch together. Had they started seeing each other?

"Alright, darling?"

Gill jumped as a face was pressed up against her side window.

"Do you need a push?"

Gill shook her head and attempted a smile. She waited until the guy walked away and rejoined his friends before she exited her car and walked to her flat. Once inside, Gill sat on the sofa trying to get a handle on how she felt. Again she resisted the urge to jump back into her car and drive to the gay bars; she needed to keep her head down for a while. Gill contemplated calling someone she knew who would be a willing bedmate for the night, but realised her heart wasn't really in it. Finally, defeated and out of options, Gill went to bed and attempted to sleep.

Chapter 17

Gillian finished applying the final touches to her light make-up, then debated whether to wear her hair up or down. *'Down, up. No down, definitely down.'* She was nervous, she knew that. She only became hesitant and uncertain when she was nervous. Removing her robe, Gill put on a grey fitted trouser suit over a crisp white blouse. Finally she selected a pair of black high-heeled laced brogues, which added a good four inches to her height. Gill took a final look in the full-length mirror that stood in the corner of her bedroom, before putting her bag over her shoulder and picking up her car keys.

It was a cold November morning, the scattered autumn leaves tipped with a crisp white frost, as Gill turned into the tree lined driveway of Castlerock high school. The grounds were eerily quiet despite there being almost a thousand students and staff inside the various buildings. Gill parked in her usual spot near the PE block, forgetting she would have a longer walk through the concourse to reach the offices. Her heels echoed ominously on the concrete as she walked towards the room where she would meet her union rep before the actual hearing would take place. She became aware of a few faces looking out of windows and suddenly there were more as word quickly spread through classrooms that she was in the school. Gill wanted to disappear, but remembered Maggie's words to hold her head up, she had done nothing wrong.

The meeting room door was open and inside sat Alison Bertram, the woman who was

representing her. "Hi, Alison."

"Morning, Gillian," Alison smiled warmly at her. "Come in and have a seat."

"Thanks."

Alison put her hand on top of Gill's, "Relax and take a deep breath." She added reassuringly.

Gill nodded, "Thanks, but I'm nervous."

"Don't be, as I said on the phone yesterday, I really don't foresee any problems. Unless something unexpected comes up today, everything indicates that you will be reinstated on Monday."

Gill wanted desperately to believe the grey haired woman with the warm brown eyes, "I wish I shared your confidence."

Alison smiled. "Have you checked out the pupil's online forum? Or the social networking sites that they use?"

"To be honest I didn't want to, kids can be very cruel."

"Yes, they can."

"I was scared of what I might find."

"Well I don't blame you for thinking that way, but it's my job to do that and trust me, you won't be disappointed with what I found."

Gill looked surprised. "Really?"

Alison nodded, "Firstly, your form class 4N, they set up a petition of support. It has over fifteen hundred signatures."

"But we have less than a thousand pupils at the school."

"I know. Not only that, but there were various messages of support ranging from the usual, 'Miss. Rae is a great teacher', to some rather more insightful and interesting ones." Alison handed a print out to Gillian, "Look at the highlighted ones."

The first was a short story from a student that Gill knew well. The girl was a constant pain in Gill's backside and she dreaded seeing what had been written. But she was pleasantly surprised and heartened to find a very supportive story where the girl explained that Gillian had made her sit out on more than one class as she was dressed inappropriately. The girl went on to describe how her cleavage and buttocks had partially been on display.

Another message simply stated, "There are a few pervy teachers at this school Miss Rae isnae one of them." Gill almost laughed at that one and Alison shared her mirth.

"There are many like that, Gill. There has been a terrific show of support from both staff and students. Although I think the English department might want to look at ways to improve spelling and vocabulary," Alison joked, making reference to the students use of Net language.

"I'm deeply flattered. I had no idea."

"Now, we are going in there confidently. You leave the talking to me, it's what I'm here for. If there is anything you need to clarify, I'll turn to you and discuss it with you first. It's going to be fine, Gillian. The school simply wants to cover its back."

Gill nodded and Alison patted her reassuringly on the arm. "Let's go."

Gill watched as her union representative swung into action and was never more grateful for the support. Not only did Gill have no case to answer, it seemed that Alison was intent on putting the school on the back foot.

"Do you have a code of conduct in place to deal with homophobic discrimination?" She asked Mr. Connolly, the headmaster.

Gill watched as the normally confident, brash man squirmed in his seat.

"Ahem. No, we don't."

"I assume you have one to deal with racial discrimination and sexual harassment?"

His cocky smile was back, "Yes."

"You see, Mr. Connolly, the reality is that Ms. Rae is now highly likely to suffer from homophobic discrimination. It will most certainly come from students. She will be walking in the school grounds and words will be shouted at her making reference to her sexuality. The words will be negative and hurtful. Added to this, there will be members on your staff who are homophobic and this in turn will affect the way they relate to Ms. Rae. I am strongly recommending that you legislate for this."

Mr. Connolly again looked flustered. "I'm sure the majority of Ms. Rae's colleagues will offer their support," he protested.

"I don't doubt that. Ms. Rae is an extremely popular member of staff with both her colleagues and students. However, she *will* now encounter homophobia."

The headmaster looked to his assistant head, Maggie McLure. If he was looking for support, it wasn't forthcoming. Maggie simply remained passive, leaving him to deal with the decision he had to make. "We'll look into putting a new code of conduct in place."

Alison nodded, "That would be prudent, otherwise you could be leaving yourself and the school wide open to a financial loss at any future tribunal that may arise as a direct result of this matter."

That statement from Alison seemed to jolt Mr. Connolly into action. "We will look into it as a matter of urgency."

"Wonderful. Now we have to look at the issue of space. The female changing rooms in the PE block have now become an issue in a way they would not have been before. As you can see from the details I have provided you with, Ms. Rae never enters the female changing area without giving prior warning to the students. She waits until they are dressed. If the need arises for her to enter the changing rooms, she warns the girls beforehand. As you can see this has happened on two occasions. Once when two fourteen-year-old girls started fighting in the changing room, and on another occasion when a student suffered an epileptic fit. Ms. Rae's conduct in regard to the female changing area has been exemplary and this will continue to be the case."

"I don't doubt it."

"Good, so when can she return to work?"

"I think Monday, if that is acceptable with Ms. Rae."

Alison turned to look at Gillian for affirmation and Gill nodded. "Monday it is."

With the proceedings concluded, Gill stood in the reception area in a daze. Alison had been amazing, tackling issues Gill would have simply accepted as a result of being outed. She couldn't thank the woman enough for her help.

"I was simply doing my job, Gillian, and that's what you were doing too. Now you can continue to do your job and hopefully, with the assistance of your head teachers, that path will once again run smoothly for you."

Gill smiled, "Thanks so much, Alison." She shook the older woman's hand again. "No disrespect, but I hope I don't have to see you again."

Alison laughed at the relieved younger woman. "Me too, Gillian."

Gill left the office area and made her way to the PE block. Classes were in and she knew she would be afforded a little privacy. She was hoping to catch the head of the PE department, her boss Dennis Carter. The place was empty and the staffroom was locked. Gill could hear the sounds of a class emanating from the main sports hall. The shrill blast of a whistle followed by the squeak of rubber-soled shoes on wood. Gill felt a thrill run through her at the prospect of returning on Monday, she simply loved the building. The noises and smells that it housed. It was her life. The classes were ending early to allow the students fifteen minutes to change and be ready for their next class. Gill didn't want to be suddenly surrounded by students, so she used her

key to open the female staff changing room and went inside. Leaning back against the closed door, Gill felt herself sink to the floor with utter relief, delighted that her ordeal was over. She was there a short while, listening to everything that was going on outside. The pupils leaving the PE block and the bell going to indicate the official end of the lesson. Gill smiled, simply delighted to be feeling that sense of familiarity once again. Suddenly the door was being pushed open and Gillian quickly got to her feet to allow access to one of her colleagues, but she was instead confronted by an unfamiliar face.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't realise there was anyone in here." The English accent was distinctly Geordie.

"I'm Gillian Rae, PE teacher and you are?" Gill offered her hand to the blue eyed blonde, she could have been Annie Lennox' daughter.

The nervous looking young woman shook Gillian's hand. "Zoe Miller, PE student, I've been on placement here for two weeks. I finish at Christmas break."

Gill shook the hand offered. With everything that had happened, she had forgotten that the department was getting a PE student for six weeks. "Nice to meet you, Zoe, I'm one of the staff here. I'll be back on Monday, so I'll be seeing a lot more of you. Are you enjoying the experience?"

"Oh totally, it's great and because the department has been a member of staff down, I've been getting a lot of classes on my own." Zoe suddenly looked panicked, realising what she was saying.

Gill smiled, "Don't worry, me coming back won't change that. What year are you in?"

"My final year at Moray House, all going well, I qualify in June."

"I'm looking forward to working with you. I'll see you Monday."

Zoe Miller watched Gillian Rae walk from the changing room, not taking her eyes off her until she turned towards the staffroom.

Gillian turned up to training on Thursday evening with a spring in her step and a weight lifted from her shoulders. She warmed up and started her jog around the perimeter of the playing fields. It was very dark in the areas where the floodlights didn't reach and initially difficult to recognise the other players around her.

"Hey, Gill."

"Hi, Sheila."

"Well, how did it go?"

"Very well, I start back at work on Monday."

"That's great news, Gill."

"Yeah, it is." They slowed down as they approached the plastic pitch and Gill looked over at the car park. Emma and Hilary were standing next to the doctor's car, chatting and laughing. Gill stopped jogging and stretched her warming muscles some more. The last thing she wanted was an injury that could be avoided.

"Those two look cosy," Sheila remarked as she stretched her quadriceps.

Gillian continued to watch as Hilary and Emma walked towards them. Gill ignored Sheila's remark, "You want to hit together?"

If Sheila was surprised by the sudden change in conversation she didn't show it, simply nodding and following Gill onto the Astroturf pitch.

Word soon spread that Gillian was starting back at work on Monday and many people offered their best wishes and congratulations. Emma had given Gillian a warm hug, genuinely delighted for her friend.

"You must be so relieved, Gillian."

"I am, thanks, Emma."

Emma looked at her with genuine affection, "You should never have been put through all that in the first place, but justice has prevailed."

Gill nodded. "I can't wait to get back to work."

Hilary joined the pair as training was ending and the players were making their way from the pitch, most chatting about the weekend game and the arrangements. "Will you be needing a lift, Emma?" Gill asked, she had been giving Emma a lift to every game, but wanted to be sure that it was still required.

Emma glanced briefly towards Hilary before answering. "Yes, that would be great, Gill. Thanks." She looked to both women, "I better get going, it's supposed to rain, so I want to get home before it starts."

They watched as Emma jogged over to the parking lot and unchained her bike.

"Are you seeing Emma?"

Hilary initially looked surprised by Gill's question, but quickly regained her composure. "Yes,

we're dating." She frowned, "How did you know?"

Gill shrugged, "Just little things."

"We are trying to keep it quiet."

"It won't be for long, Sheila remarked that the two of you looked cosy earlier."

"It is difficult to keep a secret around here."

"Isn't that the truth." Gill paused, "Listen, if you want to give Emma a lift on Saturday, it's fine by me."

No, it's okay, you keep your arrangement."

"Are you sure? It's just that, if you're going to be with her anyway, you may as well give her a lift."

"I won't be, we haven't. You know. Not yet."

"I see, well, if the situation changes, just say." Gill refused to think about the pang she had felt in the pit of her stomach when Hilary confirmed her suspicions.

"Will do, see you Saturday, Gill."

"Later."

Chapter 18

"Thanks for helping out again, I really appreciate it," Gill remarked to Emma on a bitterly cold December morning.

"No problem, Gillian. I enjoy umpiring for the kids. It's good to see the raw enthusiasm they have for the game."

Gill laughed, "I know what you mean, I just wish I could get them to stop blindly chasing the ball. It's difficult to get them to stick to their positions."

"Even so, they are a good little bunch of players, I haven't seen them lose yet."

They both listened as the sounds of the fourth year team came spilling out of the changing room.

The girls were singing and laughing, it was like a scene from St. Trinians. Gill shook her head. "It really does make it worthwhile putting in the hours after school and the early start on a Saturday morning."

"I hope they have all remembered their sweatshirts, it's a cold one."

Gill glanced out at the worsening weather conditions, the wind was picking up. These were the sort of days that had adults think back on school hockey as a game that you were always cold in and frequently got your shins rapped. "I'll put them through a good warm-up, get the blood flowing before they get on the pitch." Gill rubbed her own hands together at the thought of venturing outside. "I think we're going to suffer more than they are." Gill banged the changing room doors. "Come on, you lot, let's get started." She added, "Make sure you are wrapped up warm."

After an extensive warm-up Gill called the players together for a quick chat. "Okay, girls, you know they are a skilled bunch. They gave us our toughest test last year."

"They are dirty, Miss!"

"Don't worry, I'll make sure they don't get away with any nasty stuff."

"Their teacher calls the fouls wrong as well. Last year she was a right bitch."

"Language," Gill cautioned.

"Sorry, Miss."

"Forget all that, you are the better team, go out and show them that. Now have a team huddle and give up a big shout."

The girls did as Gill instructed and soon the match got underway. As expected there were a few meaty challenges and the clashing of sticks resounded and echoed in the trees surrounding the pitch. Gillian umpired the first half and she did it in such a way that the game flowed without descending into chaos. Too many stops and starts and the girls lost interest, but letting too many fouls go made them more aggressive. It was a balance Gill had learned to achieve over the last three years. It was scoreless at half time.

"Miss, they are cheating!"

"I know it's a tough game, but you are doing great."

"That teacher, Miss, she is as bad as them."

Gill looked over at the older woman, she knew her from being a schoolgirl and playing hockey against her teams. She used to say the exact same thing as her girls were now. "Try and stay focussed, you can win this game."

Gill got the girls ready for the second half with a few words of wisdom and they were underway again. Castlerock had come close on a couple of occasions, but the match remained goalless. With five minutes to go the opposition were awarded a corner by their teacher. Gillian stood at the half way line where five of her team waited for the penalty corner to be taken, shouting words of encouragement to their defensive teammates. Gill watched as the opposition teacher ordered the corner retaken once, then a second time, as the defenders were breaking too early. Gill couldn't believe what she was seeing. The woman was actually about to try and cheat them out of the game. After a warning to the defence, the corner was taken for the third time and teacher immediately blew her whistle and awarded a penalty flick, claiming that Castlerock had broken the back line early for the third successive time.

Gill found herself sprinting towards the woman, unable to idly stand by and watch the spectacle being played out before her. It was one thing for her girls to be beaten fairly, but to be cheated out of the game by a biased teacher was totally unacceptable to her. "Can I have a word with you?"

The tall slim woman with the short dark curly hair looked at Gill dismissively. "After the game."

"No. Right now."

"Make it quick."

"You are cheating."

"I think you will find that the rules state that, if the defenders break the back line too early, I am perfectly within my rights to award a penalty stroke after the third infringement."

"I agree with the rules, the problem is, they only broke the back line once."

"I disagree."

"You may not remember me, but I played against your school team several years ago and you pulled the exact same stunt. Is this really how you want your girls to win a game of hockey?"

"I have awarded a penalty stroke and that's what will be taken."

"Then I shall instruct my girls to leave the field." The hushed words were becoming heated.

"You can't do that!"

"I won't have them cheated."

The woman sneered, "Is that what you will do if a decision goes against you when you play for Great Britain?"

Gill hesitated for a moment, should she let this happen? The girls would learn a valuable lesson. "Are you going to change your mind and award a penalty corner instead of a flick?"

"No. It's a flick."

Gill nodded, her girls could learn a valuable lesson about cheats today, but that would mean they would also feel like she had let them down and there was no way Gillian was about to do that. She gave three long blasts on her whistle and everyone looked at her. "Games over girls, that's time." She knew she had done the right thing. It was a so called friendly, nothing was a stake.

Gill walked back towards the changing rooms with Emma and they watched as the girls complained about the game and joked with each other. Some of the girls were already waiting at the door as Gill walked up.

"I wonder if Emma is Miss Rae's girlfriend?" This question was followed by a few giggles, as the girls were unaware of Gill's presence.

"No, Miss Hughes is not my girlfriend."

There were few screams. "Oh my God, Miss, you scared me to death."

Gill opened the main door to the PE block. "Miss Hughes is someone who has been kind enough, on occasion, to give up her free time on a cold Saturday morning when we have needed an extra umpire to cover our games. Please refrain from gossiping about her."

"She is nice looking though, Miss." There were quite a few nodded agreements to this statement.

Gill rolled her eyes, "Get showered and changed, you lot and stop gossiping."

"I was just saying, Miss. You're single, is she?"

Gill sighed, "Correct me if I'm wrong, Michelle, wasn't it just last week that you were trying to set me up with your auntie?"

"She thinks you're hot, Miss."

Oh, dear God. Gill shook her head, hoping that this fascination with her love life would blow over soon. "I'll be knocking on the door in fifteen minutes so hurry up, I have a game this afternoon."

"Okay, Miss."

Twenty minutes later Gill and Emma watched on with amusement as the girls filtered out of the changing rooms, complaining about the various lumps and bumps they had acquired that

morning.

"See you on Monday, girls."

"Bye, Miss, have a good game. Bye, Miss Hughes. Thanks for helping out."

Those comments were echoed by most of the third and fourth year girls as they bustled out into the cold December morning, they were a noisy bunch.

Gill looked to Emma smiling and shaking her head. "Are you hungry?"

"A little."

"I'll pop the kettle on and I have some pastries. We have an hour before we need to be at the Maybury, so we can relax for a few minutes."

Emma took a seat in the staff room as Gillian prepared the cups for tea. "Have you had any news about the international hockey?"

Gill nodded as she dunked the teabags into the hot water. "I meet up with the GB squad the second weekend in January."

"Are you nervous?"

"A little, but I won't admit that to anyone else. I haven't even played a full international for Scotland and here I am jumping straight in at the deep end with the best players in Britain."

"From what I've seen, you are one of the best in Britain." Emma reassured her friend.

"Thank you."

"I'm not placating you, Gillian, you deserve the call up."

Gill nodded, "It's going to be a little daunting, no matter what."

"Still no word from the Scottish selectors?"

"Not a thing. I actually think they are trying everything to prevent my GB call up."

"How so?"

Gill finished chewing her mouthful of croissant and took a sip of tea before answering. "In the last three seasons I have had not one drugs test. Since the newspaper article I've had two. They claim the tests are random, but I don't think that's a coincidence."

Emma was thoughtful, "I don't think so either, but what if there was another reason?"

Gill frowned, "Like what?"

"Perhaps the Scottish selectors want to be absolutely sure before picking you."

"I love your optimistic outlook, you are definitely a glass half full kind of girl. Hilary is lucky to have you." Gill hadn't been expecting those additional words to come out of her mouth, but they had and now they were out in the open. The two women stared at each other, both seemingly unsure of how to continue.

Emma nodded thoughtfully as she blew on her hot tea. "Thanks."

Gill cleared her throat. "I know we have been doing a lot together, but if you need to free up some time, it's fine with me."

"Don't you dare, Gillian."

Gill frowned, "What did I do?"

"Do you think that because I am dating, I am going to stop being your friend?"

Gill was tongue tied, taken aback by the anger in the normally placid Emma's voice. "I'm sorry, I know that's not the type of person you are."

"Do you want to stop being friends?"

"What? No! No, I don't. I'm sorry, I was being silly."

"I tell you this, Gillian Rae, we're friends. I enjoy our friendship and if you think that I would drop you as a friend because I met someone, then you don't know me at all."

Gillian all but pouted at being told off by Emma. The pair were quiet for a few moments, both reflecting on the conversation, before Gillian finally spoke. "I think, in these few short months, I've gotten to know you pretty well. I value our friendship and my life is certainly richer with you in it."

Emma was stunned by Gillian's heartfelt words. "My goodness, for someone who has a reputation for being a shallow joker, you can be quite profound. There is a lot more depth to you that you keep hidden from others. You, my friend, are well worth getting to know."

Gillian was embarrassed by the praise Emma bestowed upon her and mumbled a thanks as she took another sip of tea.

"The pupils think you're fantastic you know. They were singing your praises after the game today."

"There was no way I was going to stand idly by and watch them being cheated."

"The teacher I was umpiring with said it was about time someone called her on the cheating."

"Emma, the game was practically over, it was an easy decision to end it there."

Emma shook her head at Gillian who was always reluctant to accept a compliment or praise. She seemed more comfortable when she was being criticised. She was a modest woman.

"We better get going. It's the last game before Christmas and no doubt I will have to pee in a cup again at the end of it," Gill joked.

"Look on the bright side. You always need the loo at the end of a game anyway."

"Every cloud has a silver lining."

The pair laughed as they headed out to Gillian's car.

Chapter 19

Gill let herself relax as she felt the water cascade over her. The pupils had left for the Christmas holidays and there would be no school for three weeks. Gill had slept a little late that morning and decided to postpone washing her hair until after classes had finished. She was looking forward to the staff party. Grabbing a disposable razor from the packet on the shelf in the staffroom shower, Gill shaved under her arms. As she rinsed off she heard the door open and assumed Zoe, the PE student, had come into the changing room. "If you need the shower, I'll only be a minute," Gill called out.

"No rush, Gillian," came the reply from Zoe, her Geordie accent thick and instantly recognisable.

Gill smiled, she was going to miss the younger woman; they had got along great in the last four weeks. Gillian knew Zoe was going to make a terrific teacher after she qualified in June. She was already more than capable of handling all aspects of the lesson, including the difficult kids who often made a teacher's life miserable. Suddenly Gill felt a whoosh of cold air upon her body as the shower curtain was moved aside. She blinked her eyes open to see Zoe standing before her, naked.

"May I join you?"

Gill smiled, "You do know that it would be thought very wrong for me to be intimate with a placement student?"

Zoe nodded, "That's why I waited until after the bell. I officially ceased to be your teaching student over ten minutes ago." The Geordie grinned at Gill.

"I could also point out that it would be frowned upon for two teachers to be found having sex together on school property."

"And yet it goes on all the time," Zoe replied, as she took a bold step and entered Gill's personal space. They were almost touching, both standing fully naked in the shower. Gill took the final step and kissed Zoe, pulling the younger woman towards her beneath the hot spray. Gill thrust her hands into Zoe's short blonde hair, she couldn't deny her attraction to the younger woman, but now she could finally act upon it. They had been flirting privately for weeks, building to this.

Zoe moaned as Gill captured her ear between her teeth and sucked on her lobe. "I've been wanting you since that morning I first saw you in this very changing room." Zoe husked. "You looked sexy as hell in your trouser suit. I watched you walk away until you turned the corner. Oh."

Gill captured Zoe's nipple with her mouth and sucked on it, causing her to stop talking. The nipple instantly hardened in her mouth. Gill held both breasts in her hands, moving her mouth from one nipple to the other, spurred on by the sounds Zoe was making. Feeling the trainee teacher's legs tremble, Gill knew that she was really close to coming. She thrust her hand between Zoe's legs and that was all the student needed to tip her over the edge. Gill held her close, making sure she didn't slip to the floor of the shower cubicle.

"God, that's what four weeks of foreplay does to me." Zoe laughed lazily as she waited for her body to recover from the orgasm. Then before Gill had time to register what was happening, Zoe reversed the situation and pushed the teacher against the wall. Kneeling between Gill's parted legs Zoe buried her face in the patch of short trimmed brown hair and easily found the already engorged clitoris.

Gill groaned as she grabbed the back of Zoe's head and pushed her hips forward to meet the young woman's tongue. Gill reached blindly behind her with her free hand, searching for the shower unit to help her stay upright.

Her arm straining, fist clenched around the pole of the shower, Gill felt her legs tremble with the oncoming orgasm and the effort it took to remain upright. Then she was coming, hard, her hips jerking as Zoe continued to lave her clitoris with her tongue. Finally, Gill sank slowly to the floor, spent from her exertions. Breathing heavily she looked at the shorthaired blonde. "This is a great shower." She held her hand out for Zoe to assist her back to her feet. "This isn't over, but for now we better rinse off and join the rest of the staff before we are missed." Gill kissed Zoe again, then left the shower to dry off and get changed.

Gillian stood in her underwear drying her hair, while trying to wrestle Zoe off her. "Stop it, we have only got five minutes." Gill watched in the mirror as Zoe towel dried her hair before applying gel to it. "I wish my hair was done that quickly. I like the style you have." Gill sprayed

a heat protective formula on her locks, before straightening her hair.

"Have you considered having your hair shorter?"

"Many times and looking at how quickly you styled yours, I'm once again tempted."

Zoe smiled, "I really like your hair though, even when it's not straightened it's soft and shiny looking. It's a really good cut you have, it works well when you simply blow dry it with your fingers and it has that ruffled look to it."

"Maybe we missed our calling, we should have gone into hairdressing."

"Somehow I don't see it." Zoe laughed.

Gill pulled on a pair of dark bootcut jeans and a fitted light denim shirt. She eased her feet into a pair of tan boots and then put on her Navy reefer jacket, a winter favourite. She turned to look at Zoe, who was dressed in a very alluring way. Tight skinny jeans, with black calf length boots over them and a tight fitting red t-shirt that showed off her breasts perfectly. She completed the outfit by putting on a short leather bomber jacket and tied a thin scarf around her neck. "Come on, you can put your kitbag in the boot of my car, I'll give you a lift later."

"I can't wait until later." Zoe patted Gill's ass as she said it.

Zoe looked so good that Gill was tempted to skip the afternoon's festivities. "I have to show face at this end of term Christmas party. They usually head into town afterwards and hit a few bars on George street, the place will be full of teachers from all over the city." Gill explained as she shouldered her kitbag.

Five minutes later they were standing in the main staffroom, which was packed full of Castlerock teachers, eating Christmas mince pies and helping themselves to various foods and drink. Gillian saw the headmaster walking her way and plastered a smile on her face for him.

"Gillian. How are you?"

"I'm well, headmaster and you?"

"Excellent, Gillian, and as I keep telling you, in this setting, you can call me Bart."

Gill nodded, she had been trying to think of more and more ingenious ways to try and avoid using the man's first name, but she was finally running out of ideas. "Bart, this is Zoe Miller, a fourth year PE student from Moray House who has been on placement with us for the last six weeks."

Bartholomew Connolly held out his hand, "Lovely to meet you, dear." He turned again to Gill, "How wonderful of you to invite Zoe along to our Christmas do."

Gillian noticed Maggie McLure throwing daggers her way from behind the headmaster's back, but she refused to acknowledge her. "Well, Bart, Zoe has been a fantastic student and you never know, if we ever need a new staff member, an application from Zoe would be a bonus for Castlerock, she's going to make a great teacher."

The headmaster looked at Gillian like a proud father, "I like your thinking. Networking is key. I hear you will be off training with the Great Britain hockey squad before the start of next term?"

"That's right, Sir, ah, Bart. I'm very much looking forward to the experience." Gill replied to the man who had been acting like a father to her ever since Alison Bertram had spoken to him at the hearing.

"We're all very proud, Gillian. Have a lovely Christmas holiday."

"You too, Sir."

The man nodded and moved on to another member of staff. Gillian turned to look at Zoe and shrugged. "This is how he's been ever since I was reinstated."

Zoe nodded, "Thanks for the kind words."

"They were the truth, Zoe, you are going to make a great teacher." Gillian excused herself and headed for the toilet. On the way there she passed Maggie McLure, the assistant head.

"Ouch!" She felt a sharp kick in the shin and turned to look at the culprit. "What the hell was that for?"

"You might be able to pull the wool over the head's eyes, but I know you are screwing the student!" Maggie whispered harshly. "He has just been over here telling me how fabulous you are and always thinking about the school."

"I am thinking about the school, Zoe is going to make a great teacher," Gill hissed through her pain.

"And you still haven't sorted out the problem with Hannah Myles, she is giving you those puppy dog eyes from across the room again."

"What more can I do? I show no interest in her. I talk to her politely when we pass in the corridor, I don't know what else to do. One night, Maggie, that's all it was."

"Well you obviously awoke something in her, she's left her fiancé."

"In that case, I've done them both a favour. If she's a lesbian it's better she found that out before she married the guy."

Maggie shook her head. "Unbelievable."

Gillian smiled that cute little smile. "You know it's true."

"Don't you dare make me laugh. You were trouble when I met you thirteen years ago and you're trouble now."

"I'll hook Hannah up with someone, a blind date, and the student ceased to be our student as of twelve thirty today. I was, until that time, completely professional."

Maggie laughed, "God, Gillian you'll have me going prematurely grey with your antics."

"I'll pay for your next hair appointment."

"I'll hold you to that." Maggie cautioned.

"And stop assaulting me, you will make your dodgy knee worse and I will have to tell *Bart* that you were the cause of me missing GB training."

Maggie's eyes went wide. "Bart? I don't even get to call him Bart. Unbelievable!"

"Merry Christmas, Maggie."

The pair of them laughed, "Have a great holiday, Gillian."

Two hours later found Gillian and Zoe standing amongst thirty other members of staff in a large bar on George Street. As Gill looked around the room, which was previously a bank, she noticed staff from other schools there as well. The place was full of teachers with a smattering of office workers. Gill looked around at the Christmas decorations, then spotted a face staring at her from across the room. Valerie Smith, her nemesis. If looks could kill, Gillian would be a goner. Gill smiled and raised her glass in the woman's direction. It was Christmas, the season of goodwill, after all.

"Not a fan I take it?"

Gill turned to look at Zoe who had a glint in her eye. "That woman hates me."

"I can tell."

"We play hockey at the same club, I was the driving force behind her being dropped to the seconds."

"Obviously, she isn't taking it well."

"Would you believe that even if she was still in the first team, she would be giving me the exact same look?"

"Actually, yes."

Gill laughed. "I wasn't being malicious, it was the right decision. I guess it's something that will come to us all. When it's my turn I just hope I make the decision before it is made for me."

"You think you will officially retire rather than fade out?"

Gill pursed her lips. "I hope to bow out gracefully."

"I'm sure you will."

Gill slowly ran her eyes over Zoe's body, then up to meet her eyes. "You want to get out of here?"

"I thought you would never ask."

Chapter 20

Gillian arrived at Musselburgh racecourse for the second day of events. She had run in the heats of the New Year sprint twenty-four hours earlier and made the semi-finals. The open event operated a handicap system and Gill knew that if she could qualify from her semi-final, while still keeping a little something in reserve, she would have a chance in the final.

"How are you feeling, Gill?"

"Not bad, but I have to get my strategy right if I'm to qualify."

Justine agreed, "It will be tricky, especially with athletes starting behind you."

"If I finish too quickly, I won't win. I need to qualify, but hold a little something back."

Justine nodded, knowing that if Gill qualified too quickly then, under the handicap system, she would lose valuable metres in the final to her opponents. "You nervous?"

"No, not really, but if I make the final, it will be a different story." Gill continued to gently stretch her muscles as she chatted with Justine, little Charlotte copying her movements. Gill pretended to lean on the child's shoulder for balance as she stretched her quadriceps. Charlotte

mimicked Gill's movement, taking her job as warm-up partner very seriously, with Justine holding her daughter's hand for added balance.

"There are a few familiar faces upstairs."

"Yeah, who?"

"Emma and Hilary. Laura and her boyfriend are here too. Maggie McLure and her husband. A few others I recognise, but I'm not sure of their names."

"It's nice to have support."

"They are all saying they're only here to see you have to buy a drink when you win."

Gill laughed, it was typical of her friends. She sat on the floor and continued to stretch.

"Are Emma and Hilary together?"

Gill remained indifferent as she replied, "Yeah, they are."

"You never mentioned it."

Gill shrugged, "Nothing to say. I'm sure they will be happy together."

Justine shook her head, not wanting to push the issue. "Fifteen minutes until you go out onto the race course."

"Thanks, Justine." Gill increased the intensity of her warm up as Justine and Charlotte looked on.

When it was time, Justine imparted some words of wisdom. "Remember, your best chance of winning the main event is if you can keep something in reserve."

Gill nodded.

"What do you want to say to Gillian, Charlotte?"

"Good luck, Gilly!"

They waved to Gill, then headed up into the stands to watch the semi-final from there.

A short while later Gillian trudged upstairs to meet with her friends, who were gathered in one of the main bars. She rolled her eyes as a few eyebrows were raised her way. "I know, don't say it."

"You almost blew it, Gillian," Laura complained. "What were you thinking?"

"I was *thinking*, oh no, I can't finish first, so I slowed up as I approached the line. That's when three runners flew past me and I almost ended up out of the final."

"It was perfect, Gillian." Justine defended.

"It was lucky." Gillian stated shaking her head.

"You're in the final and you have a fifteen metre start. That sounds good to me," Emma added, offering her encouragement.

Gill nodded, deep in thought. She had a chance, but she was starting from lane one. She would be the athlete closest to the crowd. It could have gone a lot worse and although there was an element of luck involved, she had to be happy with the outcome.

"Gill, it's 110 metres, but you are only going to be running 95 metres. What's your current time for a 100 metres?" Hilary asked.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I was hand timed at twelve and a half seconds." She looked to Justine, "When was that?"

"When we were fourteen."

Hilary was incredulous. "You have no idea how quickly you can run a hundred metres since high school!"

"I just know I'm quite quick."

There was laughter all around at Hilary's disbelief.

"That's the Gillian we all know and love." Maggie said fondly. "I hasten to add, it was Justine who timed her and if you saw some of the other times she had down for other students, I wouldn't put too much faith in the accuracy of it."

"Yeah, another girl ran under eleven seconds and she finished after me." This caused Justine and Gillian to fall into a fit of giggles.

"Wait how did? Oh, I don't even want to know." Hilary gave up on trying to work out what had gone wrong and how Justine could time two people in the same race. "You two are crazy when you get together."

"I had six years of this." There were looks of mock sympathy thrown Maggie's way, but everyone knew the older woman was proud of her two former pupils.

A tall, shorthaired blonde walked hesitantly towards them and waited until she had Gill's attention. She gave a wave and walked over to her. This interaction was watched by a few interested parties. "Zoe! What brings you here?"

The PE student smiled, delighted she had received a positive reception from Gillian. "I was home in Newcastle for Christmas, but by today I was bored. I remembered you talking about the New Year sprint, so I thought I would drive back today and come along to cheer you on."

"It's great to see you." Gill smiled, she had been watching Hilary and Emma together for the last two hours and Zoe would make a welcome distraction. Gill gave the younger woman a quick hug. "You're just in time, unfortunately I have to rush off, but these are my friends." Gill gestured to the people around her. "Justine, would you do the honours?"

"Like you would be any good at introductions anyway." Justine joked.

Everyone was in high spirits, enjoying the holiday and the chance to have a day out with friends, but Gillian had a job to do and it was soon time for her to start preparing for the main event. She left to go downstairs with the well wishes of everyone ringing in her ears.

Hilary shouted to her just as she was about to go out of earshot. "Gillian! No pressure, but I have one hundred pounds on you to win."

Gill sat on the bench in front of her locker. The smell of Deep Heat and Ralgex assaulted her nasal passages as some athletes liberally coated their muscles with the creams and sprays. She took her time, slowly removing her training shoes and replacing them with a pair of running spikes. They were racing on grass, but the spikes remained the best choice of footwear. She waited to be called.

Up in the stands Gill's friends waited on her to appear. The air had chilled noticeably since the semi-final heats and everyone was doing their best to keep warm. They watched as Gill walked out with the other seven sprinters, all men. As she took her place at the back of lane one, the sprinters were asked to start getting ready. Gill was wearing layers of clothing and as she removed her tracksuit, it became apparent that she was keeping on her running tights and the tight long sleeved insulated top she wore under her vest.

"Do you think the extra layer will hamper Gill's chances?" Maggie asked Justine.

"No, if anything I think it's a smart move. They are all stripped and ready to go, but they all have to wait to be introduced. It's much colder now than it was earlier."

There were various patrons around them who were discussing the upcoming sprint and referring to Gill like some prize filly about to run the Derby. This caused laughter amongst her friends.

"Do you know the female sprinter?"

Justine turned to look at a middle-aged man in a tweed suit covered by a Barbour jacket. He had a deerstalker hat on his head.

"Yes, I know Gillian very well."

"Then perhaps I might glean some first hand information from you?"

"Ask away."

"My friends say she can't win, but I have a gut feeling about her."

"Go with your gut."

"You're not letting your heart rule your head?" He questioned.

"Gillian has been training hard for this, she is also a smart woman, hasn't ran flat out yet. She has more to give for the final."

"If I told you that you have convinced me to put five thousand pounds on your friend to win, would that change your mind?"

"It certainly is a lot of money, but I believe Gillian has an excellent chance. Also, you don't look like a fool to me, I suspect you can afford to lose the five thousand, but you're not wanting to throw it away."

"I see your friend isn't the only smart woman around here."

Justine smiled. "I've known Gillian since she was twelve years old. She is very focussed on winning this event."

"Then that's good enough for me. Thank you for your expertise."

Justine watched as the man made his way to the betting area to place his bet. With Gillian's odds at 8-1, he stood to make a handsome profit if she won. The racecourse tannoy burst to life announcing the start of the main event, and the announcer began introducing the athletes who would contest this year's final.

"In lane number one, starting with a handicap of fifteen metres, we have Gillian Rae from Edinburgh." There was a good cheer went up, Gill was a local girl and the only female, but by far the loudest cheer came from the area where her friends were. They shouted their support loudly.

Gill walked forward and waved to the crowd as she was introduced. She kept her legs moving as she waited for the rest of the field to go through the same process until, finally, the athletes were

called to their starting positions. Gill's odds had her seeded to finish fifth, but her heart was set on first place. That very heart was now pounding as she stepped up to her mark. She steadied herself and began to focus on controlling her breathing. Closing her eyes, Gill attempted to block out all external stimuli in an effort to relax a little. With a final deep exhale, she opened her eyes and looked straight down the course, focussing on the distance to the finishing line. Gill was now in the zone, like some switch had been flicked, the noise around her started to fade as her concentration narrowed and intensified.

The starter called for the athletes to take their marks and Gill got into position. Then they were set. There was a pause and the starting gun fired. They were off. Gill had no interest in any other athlete on the course. This was about running flat out to the line in under twelve seconds.

From the stands, Emma watched as Gill got a good start, but it wasn't a flyer. At half way she was in third place, closing in on the two athletes in front of her, but four of the athletes who started behind Gill were rapidly closing her down. Everyone was shouting and cheering on their favourite and Emma hoped that Gill could do it. She was moving past the runners in front, her form was good and she looked relaxed, but the favourite was coming through the field like a train.

With twenty yards to go Gill was in front and the finish was in sight. Her eyes were wide open, her legs and arms pumping. She felt powerful and she knew she was close.

Everyone in her party was screaming for Gill.

"Run, Gillian!"

"Come on!"

As Gill crossed the line, so did the favourite, a professional sprinter from Glasgow, closely followed by the rest of the field. Gill looked around wondering what had happened, she had seen him pass her, but had no idea if it was before the line or after, but he looked confident with his arms in the air.

Gill started shaking hands with the other runners, all of them breathing heavily from their exertions. "Well run."

"Thanks."

"Hell of a close finish."

Gill lifted her head to look at the professional athlete. "Did you win?"

He nodded, "I think I just pipped you."

They shook hands and he walked off. Gill hung her head as she leaned on the white rail that surrounded the racecourse. She was full of disappointment having come so close.

The stands were abuzz with speculation about the outcome. No one was certain who the winner was. Hilary turned to Emma, "Damn, I think she lost."

Emma wasn't so sure, "I don't know, the guy was finishing faster, so it might be that he looked like he won, but maybe the race ended a stride too quickly for him."

The announcement came that it was a photo finish and everyone had to wait for the result. Less than a minute later it was finally announced ... Gillian had won!! The photograph displayed on the large screens confirming that it was her chest that had broken the tape first.

Laura was first to react, "Gill's tits have just won the New Year sprint."

"A fine pair they are," added Justine and everyone saw the humour of it.

After the result was confirmed everything was a blur for Gill. She was led over to the waiting press and television interviewers, for photographs and a few words about the race. As the finish was replayed to her she was asked to comment on what she thought. Even with the cameras on her she spotted what she knew all her friends would, her breasts broke the tape first. She would never live this down. After the interviews and photographs, Gill was led to the podium for the ceremony where she was presented with a tall, intricately carved, glass trophy and a check for four thousand pounds. She was the first female winner of the race since its inception in 1870.

Gill showered and then joined her friends back in the warmth of the bar. Justine greeted her first. "Gill, have you heard? There's going to be a steward's enquiry."

"What?"

"Yeah, someone has complained that you had an unfair advantage because your bra was padded."

"Very funny."

There were howls of laughter all around the place and Gill joined them, in between accepting the congratulations of many people in the place. Shortly after her arrival a waiter appeared with a magnum of champagne. "Courtesy of the gentleman at the bar. He said to inform you, he will keep them coming your way all night for you and your friends to enjoy." Gill raised her eyebrows, genuinely taken aback by the man's generosity. The waiter added, "He said your friend talked him into placing five thousand pounds on you to win."

"Wow." Gill looked across to the bar as the waiter began to pour champagne into glasses. Taking the first glass, Gill saluted her benefactor, who raised his glass and smiled.

"Gilly! You were really good."

Gill stooped and picked Charlotte up. "Thanks, Charlotte, where would you like to go for the

Easter holidays, my treat?"

"I can choose?" Charlotte's eyes lit up.

Gill nodded, "Anywhere you like."

Charlotte raised a little finger to her lips as she gave the question some serious thought. "I want to go to Disneyland."

Justine's eyes went wide and Maggie McLure stifled a laugh behind her hand.

"We can go to Disneyland Paris," Gill deftly avoided Florida, knowing it would cost even more than the money she just won.

"Can Emma come too?" Charlotte asked innocently.

"Ah, I think Emma has to go home for Easter." Gill looked over to the Irishwoman who was smiling at Charlotte. Hilary on the other hand didn't look overly impressed.

"Oh, okay."

Gill kissed Charlotte on the cheek, "We're going to Eurodisney," she said enthusiastically.

Charlotte giggled as Gill spun her around in her arms, then started squealing. "Stop, Gilly. Stop!"

Gill put Charlotte down and was aware of Justine staring at her. "What?" she mouthed quietly.

Justine said into her ear, "Are you out of your mind?"

"No, I'm treating us all to a holiday."

"Gill, that will be all your winnings." Justine protested.

Gillian shrugged, "I can't think of a more enjoyable way to spend them, than on a holiday with you and Charlotte. Besides, if things keep going the way they are with Kenny, I might not get many more opportunities."

"No, Gill, that won't happen. We will always be your family."

Gill smiled, "Please let me do this?" Gill watched as Justine struggled to answer. So she asked again. "Please, Justine, it's what I really want."

Justine hugged her and kissed her cheek and Gill knew she had a yes.

With everyone holding a glass of champagne, they raised a toast to Gill's breasts and the

evening's celebrations got underway.

"What a night that was," Gill declared as she sat on her small sofa with Zoe sitting next to her. She looked across at the large sofa, which currently had Emma and Hilary asleep on it, one at each end. The sitting room table was littered with pizza boxes, the reason Hilary and Emma had yet to make it home. The pair had shared a taxi with Gill and Zoe, but decided they wanted to get pizza from the place outside Gill's flat. That ended up with them joining Gill and Zoe and now they had fallen asleep.

"Look at the pair of them, they're shattered. They work hard at the hospital and don't get as many holidays as we do."

"I think the champagne has a lot to do with their current state," Zoe added.

Gill laughed softly, "I've never seen either of them so drunk." She turned to look at Zoe, "You could stay tonight, I'm not looking for a relationship, Zoe, but we could have some fun."

"No strings attached, I'm up for that." She looked over to their guests, "Shall we wake them?"

Gill debated what she should do. "They look so peaceful, let's just cover them with a blanket." Gill stood up and removed a blanket that was draped over the back of the sofa and covered the sleeping pair. She turned and held her hand out to Zoe, "Shall we?"

Emma woke up with a headache. Opening one eye, she knew she was in Gill's sitting room, with Hilary asleep beside her. She was aware of a rhythmic banging sound and briefly thought it was her head before realising the noise was coming from Gill's bedroom. Emma leaned her head back against the arm of the sofa as she heard Zoe screaming Gillian's name.

Meanwhile Zoe lay exhausted in the tangled bed sheets. She turned her head to look at Gill only to notice her bed partner seemed a little preoccupied.

"I don't care whose benefit that was for, it was bloody fantastic."

The protest died on Gill's lips as she looked at Zoe. "I'm sorry."

"No need for sorry, Gill. I know this isn't going anywhere but I'm happy to come along for the ride, so to speak."

Gill smiled, "Want to go again?"

Zoe laughed, "Give me another few minutes then we can start again."

"You want something to drink?"

"Any kind of juice would be great."

Gill padded naked to the kitchen and removed a carton of fresh orange juice from the fridge. Grabbing two glasses from a shelf above, Gill turned to find Emma staring straight at her through the open sitting room door. The pair were motionless for a few moments, Gill standing rooted to the spot, orange juice and glasses in hand. Finally, Gill simply nodded her head before returning to the bedroom, her appetite for sex gone.

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~ The Player ~

by weebod

Disclaimer: This is an original story. The main characters and the story are the product of the author's imagination.

Rated NC17: For profanity and sex

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

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Chapter 21

Justine opened her front door to Gillian. "What brings you here on a Monday?"

"I missed Friday, so I've come to see my favourite girls."

"Gilly!" Right on cue, Charlotte came running when she heard Gillian's voice.

Justine smiled, "I didn't tell her you were coming for dinner. I left it as a surprise."

Gill picked Charlotte up and gave her a hug. "Did you miss me?"

"Uhuh."

"I got you a present."

"You had time to shop?" Justine asked, clearly surprised.

Gill rolled her eyes, "At the airport, yes." Gill walked to the kitchen with Charlie in her arms, then deposited the little girl on her seat at the kitchen table. Gill put the gift bag in front of her and Charlotte hastily opened it.

"It's a dolly!" came the excited response to seeing her gift. A Scottish doll in highland dress.

"She sings too." Gill demonstrated by pressing a little button on the doll's wrist and she burst into the opening verse and chorus of *Auld Lang Syne*.

Justine sent a look Gill's way that clearly said 'I'm going to kill you,' but Gill simply laughed and handed Justine her gift, a bottle of Eternity. "It's all they had," Gill joked.

"It's still my favourite. Thank you." Justine looked to Charlotte who was pressing the button on the doll's wrist for the fifth time. "Charlotte can you stop pressing the dolly until after dinner? And say thank you to Gillian."

Charlotte looked at Gillian. She had been engrossed in the doll, who moved as she sang, since Gillian had first pressed her wrist. "Thank you, Gilly."

"You're welcome, Charlie." She turned to Justine, "What's for dinner?"

"Hungry are you?"

"Starving, I've been eating healthily all weekend, creating a good impression." Justine looked dubiously at her. "Honestly, no fizzy juice, no crisps or chocolate and no fast food whatsoever, only balanced meals."

"We're having chicken Kiev with salad." Justine paused, "And a special treat of chips, just for you."

"Mmm, thank you."

"And we have apple pie and ice-cream for dessert."

"Isn't your mum the best, Charlotte?"

The youngster nodded as she fixed her doll's kilt.

Gill looked hopefully at Justine, "Do you have fizzy juice?"

"No, fruit juice or water."

Gill rolled her eyes as she poured water from the jug on the table into her glass. "At least I'm getting chips, I suppose it's something," she grumbled, then winked at Charlotte. "How's nursery, you learn any new songs?"

Charlotte nodded, "Sizzling Sausages and Wheels On The Bus."

"How do they go?"

Justine intervened before her daughter burst into song. "Maybe after dinner," she said as she put Charlotte's plate in front of her.

"After dinner it is."

The room fell silent as the three females started eating dinner. Gill bit into the Kiev and it was heavenly. "Justine, did you make these?"

"Yes."

"You really are a terrific cook, and I don't know how you find the time. You work the same hours as I do and you train almost as often."

"I've just learned to manage my time, Gill. Kids will do that to you."

"I suppose, but I'm impressed."

"Tell me about your weekend?"

"It was eye opening."

"Tell me more?" Justine encouraged.

"Justine, I was surrounded by the best players in Britain, these women are used to competing on the world stage, it was a bit daunting. Also, because I don't play for Scotland, not only were the English players strangers to me, but I don't really know any of the Scots beyond playing against them in the league."

"The more of these sessions you attend, all that will come, but tell me how it went?"

"Really well." Gill smiled, "After the initial meeting up and being introduced to everyone, I simply got on with it and concentrated on the hockey, on the things I know I can do well, like striking a ball at a penalty corner. If there is one single skill that will get me a game for GB, that's it. Their current routine has a terrible average, it's approaching one goal in seven penalty corners. It should be one goal in three. That's the key for me, Justine, I know I can produce." The passion in Gill's voice left no doubt that she was serious about this.

Justine's eyes lit up with excitement, "You're really going to do this, Gillian. You're going to play for Great Britain."

"I really want to. I don't care if Scotland never pick me, this is a fantastic opportunity."

"You hear that, Charlotte? Gillian is going to play hockey at the Olympics."

"Can I watch?"

Gill rubbed Charlotte's mass of red curls, "Course you can."

Once Charlotte was asleep in bed, after several renditions of *Auld Lang Syne*, Gill and Justine sat in the living room drinking coffee.

"How are things with Zoe?"

"We aren't together, we had a little fun." Gill shrugged.

"Does Zoe know that?"

"Yeah, she does, she's a big girl, we got together a couple of times and had some great sex."

Justine sipped her coffee. "What about Emma?"

Gill gave Justine a warning look. "Emma is with Hilary."

"You like her, Gill and she likes you."

"And so did Hilary, but now she is with Emma and I won't do anything to change that." Gillian's tone had turned very serious.

"If they don't last, would you ask Emma out? Date her properly?"

"I can't answer that, she is with Hilary." Gill refused to go down this road and Justine was pushing hard.

Not ready to let the matter drop yet, Justine continued, "Are you in love with Emma?"

The two friends stared at each other, they never had secrets, and Justine knew Gill wouldn't lie to her, but she also knew she was on thin ice.

"I don't *know*, Justine." Gill was clearly frustrated by the topic. "I'm attracted to her, that much I'm sure of. I enjoy spending time with her and if I'm perfectly honest, I *feel* something when I see her with Hilary. Justine, I don't even know if I would be capable of having a relationship and Emma isn't a woman who will readily take a risk. The last thing I would want to do is hurt her. I

care too much about her to do that."

Justine gave Gillian a pleading look. "Promise me, if it doesn't work out with Hilary, you will give it a try."

Gillian shook her head. "Please don't ask me to promise that, Justine."

"Okay, fair enough, but will you at least give it serious consideration?"

"Why?"

Justine smiled sadly at Gillian, "Because when you look at her, your face lights up."

"She might never want me, Justine."

"I think she will."

"How can you know that?" Gillian's tone was a little sharper than she intended.

"Because when she looks at you, she has the same look."

"She's with Hilary," Gill repeated, feeling her throat suddenly thick with emotion.

Justine nodded, "I know."

Gillian let her head fall back against the sofa. "You're exhausting me woman."

"That's because you don't deal with your emotions."

"Yeah? Has Kenny proposed yet?"

Justine's answer was a scatter cushion aimed at Gillian's head and the pair laughed as Gill caught it.

Chapter 22

It was a cold wet January evening that greeted the Dunedin players on their return to training after the Christmas break. Gillian pulled a black woolly hat on, making sure to cover her ears, before braving the elements. Outdoor training under floodlights was great, but in January with sleet driving into your face, you wouldn't blame anyone for sitting at home with their feet up sipping a cup of hot cocoa. Pulling on her waterproofs over her training gear, Gill paused and

took a deep breath before opening the door and braving the elements.

After a thorough warm up, Gill felt good and more interested in the training until it came to working on the short corner routine.

"Can we keep this moving faster, I'm starting to cool down. We will be pulling muscles soon," Jane Dodds complained from her crouched position, waiting to stop the ball for Gillian to strike at goal.

Scott took the complaint on board. "Alright people, let's swap to some fast paced drills and get those muscles warmed up again."

Gill jokingly offered Jane a hand up, which she accepted just for the fun.

"What's Sarah doing here? In uniform too?" Jane remarked.

Gill turned to look at Sarah Mathieson, a traffic cop with Lothian and Borders police force. There were a few wolf whistles as Sarah made her way towards the first team.

"Hey, Sarah. You here to arrest someone?" Cammo joked.

"I'm here to see Gill." Something in the policewoman's tone caught Gill's attention.

There were a few laughs and jokes. "What did you do, Gillian? Sleep with the Chief of Police's wife?" Cammo joked.

"No, it must be something traffic related." Jane joked, "You've been caught on speed camera giving head while driving." A few of the team agreed that was more likely.

"Whatever it was, I didn't do it." Gill added in jest, but the serious look on Sarah's face told her this was no laughing matter.

"Gill can we walk over to the side of the pitch?"

The business-like tone in their teammates voice stopped all hilarity in its tracks. Everyone was quiet, and watched as Gillian followed Sarah over to the side of the pitch and out of earshot of everyone.

"I wonder what that's all about?" Hilary asked, looking around at her bewildered colleagues.

"No idea, but it seems fairly serious," Sheila, the team captain remarked.

Sarah guided Gillian away from the sidelines and under the shelter of the building. Gillian was beginning to wonder just what was going on.

"What's this about, Sarah? You're beginning to freak me out."

"Gill do you know a Justine Hill?"

Gill frowned, wondering why on earth Sarah would want to know that. "Of course I do, we've been best friends since we were twelve years old. Why?"

Sarah swallowed hard. "Gill, she was involved in an accident this afternoon."

Gillian felt her blood run cold and knew it was fear. She knew her head was shaking from side to side, not wanting to hear anymore, or believe anything Sarah was telling her, but she had to ask. "How serious?"

"She's in a really bad way, Gillian." There was nothing but compassion in Sarah's eyes.

Gill could feel herself shaking. "What happened? Where is she?" There was panic in her voice now.

"A van left the road this afternoon, it mounted the pavement and hit Justine and a child who we assume was with her."

"Oh my God, Charlotte!" Gillian staggered and Sarah held onto her.

"The little girl is in the Sick Kids with pelvic injuries, it's serious but not life threatening."

Gill's hands flew to her face. "Oh, thank God. Where is Justine, I need to go to her? Do her family know?"

"Not yet, Gill, that's why I need to speak to you. I recognised your name in her diary, but it wasn't clear who her relatives are or if there are any in Edinburgh. The only surname the same in the diary is for a Colin Hill with an address in Perth."

Gill nodded, "Okay, that's Justine's older brother. Her mum is Pauline Brooks, she remarried after the death of Justine's father. She has two sisters."

"I have the address in Colinton for Pauline Brooks."

"Can I go, I really want to get to the hospital?" Gill was looking around frantically, not even sure what she was looking for.

"Gill wait, I need her sister's names."

"Suzanne Wills, lives in St Andrews, an English teacher." Gill burst into tears. "She's Justine's twin sister." She wiped at her tears, "She has an older sister, Mandy, I'm sorry, I don't know her address."

"That's okay, Gillian, she will be in the address book. Listen, I'll get one of the girls to drive

you."

"No, I'll get myself there."

"Please, you're in no fit state." She held onto Gill, who obviously just wanted to bolt. Sarah called to an injured player, "Wait here with Gillian and don't let her out of your sight. I'll be back in one minute, Gill, please wait here."

The team had stood quietly watching the conversation unfold, knowing it was bad without being able to hear it. They waited with baited breath as Sarah jogged over to them.

"Listen, Gillian has had some very bad news and she needs someone to drive her to the Royal Infirmary as she is in no fit state to drive. Her best friend was in a serious accident this afternoon, she's on life support, but Gillian doesn't know that yet. I have to go and inform the family, so Gillian is going to be the first one there."

Hilary didn't hesitate and offered first, but she was only marginally quicker than almost every other person there with a car. "I'll take her, I know the hospital better than anyone."

"I want to go with you," Emma stated.

Hilary nodded, "Alright let's get going before she heads off by herself."

"Don't worry about any kit being left behind, we'll pick it up for you both, and Gillian." Sheila said as she watched her teammates hurry over to Gillian.

The remainder of the team watched as their four teammates left.

"Poor, Gillian, that's just awful." Jane shook her head, "I hope her friend pulls through."

"She looks so peaceful." Gill was fighting back tears as she looked at her best friend. The lump in her throat was so painfully hard, she was struggling to swallow.

Emma looked on at the tragic scene with a lump in her own throat, her heart breaking for Gillian. She saw Hilary motion for her and walked over to talk with the orthopaedic doctor.

"I spoke with the Neuro doc, there is no hope. She is on life support to allow the family to say their goodbyes. There is no brain stem activity, the trauma is too severe."

Emma nodded, "I'll let Gill know."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

Hilary squeezed Emma's shoulder offering support in this difficult time. She watched her go and didn't envy her. It was never easy delivering this kind of news, but it was especially difficult to inform someone you knew, that they had lost someone.

Emma walked quietly towards her friend, mustering all her composure and compassion. She spoke softly. "Gillian?"

Gill turned to greet her with red-rimmed eyes.

"I've just spoken with Hilary." The pause already confirmed Gill's worst fears, but Emma needed to tell her. "If you have things to say, you need to tell Justine now."

Gill sobbed and nodded. She took a deep breath and sat in the seat next to Justine's bed, squeezing her warm hand. "Hey, Justine," she said quietly. Looking at her friend, it was hard to comprehend that this would be goodbye and she refused to believe that would be the case. "We've been best pals since we were twelve." Gill smiled at Justine, not seeing the injuries, not wanting to. "Since that first day at high school, you have been the source of so much fun and joy in my life. God, the pranks," Gill laughed. "Remember the time we went off to represent the school at that Volleyball tournament in Birmingham? We sneaked out of the bed and breakfast at night and found a pub that would serve us." Gill stopped and wiped her eyes as Emma listened quietly in the background. "We were sixteen and Mrs. Devlin was so mad at us. Mind you, if you hadn't puked everywhere, we just might have got away with it. Well, I suppose it would have helped if I hadn't tried to get into bed with Helen Todd, but what can I say, she was pretty."

Gill smiled and looked at Justine, hoping and praying for some kind of response, but there was nothing. Just the continually steady sounds coming from the equipment surrounding her friend. A nurse came in and asked Gill to leave as the family were on their way, but Emma pleaded for two more minutes, which the nurse reluctantly granted.

Gill swallowed hard, her voice breaking. "I love you, Justine, I always have. Ever since that first day in class, it was your dimples that did it." Gill started to cry. "Don't you worry about Charlotte, I'll make sure she knows all about her mum, how fantastic you are, your terrific sense of humour and your infinite capacity for love." Gill started to sob and Emma moved forward to comfort her.

"We have to go, Gill, Justine's mum is here."

Gillian leaned over and placed a soft kiss on Justine's cheek. "I love you, Justine." Giving her friend's hand a final squeeze Gill then stood up, wiping the tears from her eyes. She wanted to compose herself before seeing Pauline. Walking out of the room and into the corridor, Gill saw Pauline Brooks hurrying towards her, Brian, her second husband by her side.

"Pauline." That was all Gillian could say. Emma knew Gill was trying to be strong, but she

looked utterly shell-shocked.

Pauline Brooks held Gillian by the shoulders, "Don't you worry, Gillian, she's going to be fine."

Pauline Brooks spoke with such authority and conviction that Gillian almost believed her, but she knew it wasn't true and Pauline was about to find that out for herself. She hugged Pauline and then stood desolate in the hospital corridor.

Emma guided Gillian to a chair, concerned about the emotional state of her friend. "Can I get you anything, Gillian? A tea or coffee?"

Gillian turned her tear-streaked face to Emma, "What happens now?"

Gill sounded so lost and young, Emma wanted to hold her and tell her everything would be okay, but she couldn't. Nothing could change the facts. "Justine will be kept on life support to allow all her family to say their goodbyes, then the doctors will ask for permission to turn off life support."

"What about her organs?"

"Is she a donor?"

"Yes, definitely. She registered as she has very strong views on organ donation."

"The family will be informed and the organs will be removed before her life support machine is switched off."

"Oh."

"I know, but it ensures the organs are healthy."

"They will already be contacting people won't they?"

Emma nodded, "I'm sure that's the case."

"Someone is going to get a very kind heart." Gillian seemed lost in thought as she stared at the wall.

"Are you going to stay here?"

Gillian could hear Justine's mum sobbing and knew the rest of her family would be arriving soon. "No, I was lucky to have my time with her. Now her family need time."

Hilary dropped Gillian and Emma outside Gillian's flat on the High Street. Gill had hardly said a word on the way home. Emma had thanked Hilary and knew she would see her at work the

following day.

"Is there anywhere you want to go? Can I call someone for you?"

Gillian looked at Emma, "Will you come home with me and hold me?"

Emma sat on the sofa with Gill cradled in her arms.

"She looked so peaceful." Gill said softly.

Emma rubbed her back soothingly, simply listening.

"I wonder when they will turn the machine off? I want to know when it...you know?"

Emma nodded, "I do. I'll check when I go into work in the morning and I'll call you."

"Thanks, Emma."

"Anytime." Emma continued to hold Gillian, the room devoid of sound and filled only with the soft glow from a lamp in the corner.

Gillian started talking and Emma was happy to hold her and listen. "I remember my first day in high school. There was no one in my class that I knew. I looked around at all the strange faces until I met the eyes of a little blonde with ringlets and dimples. We were instantly drawn to each other. I thought she was cute and I already knew, even at age twelve, that I liked girls. She thought my jokes were funny and liked my sense of humour. Within a week, we were inseparable, which was kind of funny, since Justine is a twin. Can you believe that they went to separate schools because, and I quote, '*We want to be individuals,*' That was so Justine."

Gill was silent for a few moments and Emma wondered if she was finished with her story but, after a sniffle, Gill continued.

"We both loved sports and went to every after school sports activity together and it made perfect sense when we both applied to PE college to become teachers. We both got offers from Moray House, it was a really exciting time, a fantastic time. Then at the end of our third year Justine fell pregnant and that's when our lives began to take on different paths, but we still remained the best of friends."

Gill started to cry and Emma smoothed her hair offering quiet support. What could she say? Nothing at this point in time could make Gillian feel better. All she could do was be there for her friend offering support, only time could help Gillian now. "What will you do tomorrow?" Emma asked quietly.

Gillian sniffed, "I'll go to visit Charlotte in hospital. If Justine's life support isn't... well, I'll visit her one last time."

Chapter 23

Gillian opened her eyes and found herself alone in her bedroom and for a few seconds she had been free of the nightmare until the weight and intensity of emotion came crashing down upon her. Justine. She looked at her clock and realised it was a little after 8 a.m. Memories from the evening before came flooding back to her, weighing her down, it was too much. She grabbed her mobile and searched her contacts for Maggie McLure.

"Morning, Gillian."

"Maggie, I won't be in work today."

"Are you ill?"

Gill fought back the tears that wanted to come. Her throat was sore from the lump that had instantly formed there. "It's Justine."

"What about Justine?"

Gill sobbed, "She's not going to make it, Maggie."

Maggie McLure was silent for a few moments as something niggled at the back of her mind and then it came to her. *"Oh, Gillian, the accident on London Road, that was Justine and Charlotte?"*

"Yes." Gill began crying.

"Gillian, listen to me. Don't worry about anything, you take all the time you need, I'll talk to the headmaster and Dennis. You know where I am, don't hesitate to call me, or come to see me, whatever you need, Gillian, I'm here for you."

"Thanks, Maggie. I'll be in touch later."

"Bye, Gillian." Maggie McLure sat back in her chair, shocked. Her hand covered her mouth as she took in the full horror of what Gillian had told her. Driving to school that morning the news on the hour had spoken of a terrible accident involving a mother and her four-year-old daughter. Now she knew exactly who that mother was and Gillian had told her that Justine wasn't going to pull through.

Gillian needed to be on the move, she couldn't lie around thinking. Heading to the bathroom, she had a quick shower, her mobile phone never more than an arm's length away, waiting for a call she didn't want to receive. Dressed, Gillian sat in her living room, sipping a cup of tea. She couldn't face food, her appetite, not surprisingly, completely gone. A small part of her was in denial with thoughts of Justine making a miraculous overnight recovery despite what Hilary and Emma had told her. Her phone rang, interrupting her thoughts and she grabbed it, instantly nervous, but needing to hear something. "Hello?"

"Gillian, it's Emma."

"Hi."

There was a brief pause before the therapist continued, *"Gillian, Justine's family have agreed to turn off her life support."*

"Who is with her?"

"Her Mum and stepfather. Her brother and sisters and Kenny."

Gillian momentarily flashed with anger at the thought of Kenny being with her, but quickly pushed the thought aside, knowing it was unfair. "Well looks like everyone is there."

"Not everyone, Gillian, they are waiting on you."

Gillian was parking in the hospital less than twenty minutes later. As she walked across the car park towards the entrance she felt her anxiety start to peak. Grim faced, she strode purposefully towards the intensive care unit. Emma was waiting for her outside in the corridor.

Emma squeezed her hand, "I'll be here when you come out."

Gill nodded and made her way inside to see Justine for the very last time. She held her hand and said goodbye, then everyone left and allowed the doctors to get on with the process of harvesting Justine's organs. Gill remained stoic amongst Justine's family, wanting to be strong in their presence. Justine's mum, Pauline, invited her back to the house, but Gillian simply didn't feel up to sitting around with them, waiting for time to pass.

It was Pauline's husband, Brian who spoke quietly to her. "We think late next week for the funeral service, Gillian. I'll call you to let you know as soon as we finalise the details. There will also be an announcement in the Edinburgh Evening News."

"Thank you, Brian."

The older man gave her arm a comforting rub before returning to be at Pauline's side. Gillian

said her goodbyes then quietly slipped away from the family room. Emma, as she had promised, was waiting outside the Intensive Care Unit.

"Hilary wanted to be here too, but she's in theatre, sawing bones and hammering in nails." Emma used Gillian's own joke about Hilary being nothing more than a Joiner. It was good enough to bring a small smile to Gill's face. "What do you plan to do now?"

"I'm going to see Charlotte."

"How is she?"

"Brian said she is heavily sedated, but doing well. She will most likely need surgery again to help with her long term recovery, but the doctors are optimistic that she will regain full mobility in due course."

Emma nodded, "That's good news."

"Yes, it is."

"Can I treat you to a late breakfast?"

Gill shook her head, "Really, Emma, I have no appetite."

"But it's important for you to eat something. Please, at least have a coffee with me?"

Gill agreed and the two friends went to a cafe on the ground floor concourse of the hospital where Emma talked Gillian into eating half a fruit scone. Gill was quiet as they sat sipping their hot drinks. Emma was the one making conversation.

"Can I pop down and see you after work. Will you be home?"

"I think so. I don't have anywhere else to be." Gillian's eyes closed against the unexpected wave of pain that shot through her. When she opened them, she found Emma looking at her with concern. "I'll be fine." Gill's eyes slid to the tabletop, no longer able to look at her pain reflected in Emma's empathetic blue eyes. She idly trailed her fingertips over the tabletop as she stared out into space, deep in thought.

"Gillian." Emma got no response. "Gillian?" she tapped the back of her companion's hand and Gill looked startled.

"Sorry, I was miles away."

"I have to get back to work, but I'll see you this evening."

Gill nodded, "Thanks for being here."

"Anytime."

After visiting Charlotte, Gillian found herself sitting outside the office of Maggie McLure. The Assistant head was somewhere in the school, dealing with whatever business an assistant head dealt with. The secretaries cast sympathetic glances her way, as they went about their daily routine. The Headmaster's door opened and Bart Connolly stopped in his tracks as he saw Gillian sitting on the leather sofa. He walked over and took a seat beside her.

"How are you, Gillian?"

Gillian fought back tears, "I'm okay, Sir."

The headmaster didn't bother to correct her on the use of the word, sir. "Mrs. McLure told me this morning about your friend, I'm so very sorry, Gillian."

"Thank you, Sir." The tears leaked from her eyes as Gill was undone with his kind words and sympathy.

He stood up and returned within seconds, a box of tissues in his hands. "Thank you." Gill dabbed at her eyes.

"Gillian!"

Without thought or a care about who was around them Gill and Maggie threw themselves into each other's arms and sobbed for their loss of Justine. The headmaster made a dignified retreat and the school secretaries surreptitiously dabbed at their eyes, affected by the raw display of emotion taking place in front of them. Everyone felt their loss in some private way, but the loss of someone so young and in such tragic circumstances seemed to have an especially galvanising effect on people.

"Justine's gone, Maggie, she's gone." Gill sobbed harder.

Maggie and Gill went into the office to get some privacy away from the prying eyes of other staff members walking in and out of the building. "It's almost lunchtime, Gillian, I'll have two school dinners sent over."

"I'm really not hungry, Maggie." Gill's voice was hoarse from crying.

"I know, but you have to try something, a salad?"

Gill nodded and Maggie picked up her phone to place her order. She put on the kettle that she kept in her office. "How's the little one?"

"She's still sedated, but the doctors say she should regain full mobility. She's looking at more surgeries in the future."

"Poor little soul."

Gill knew Maggie was alluding to more than the surgeries. Charlotte no longer had her mum. She watched as Maggie made them both coffee, then placed a cup in front of her. "They hope to have the funeral late next week."

Maggie nodded, "I'll be there." The pair sat quietly sipping their coffee until Maggie started to smile and shake her head.

"What is it?"

"I was thinking of the two of you when you came to tell me of your plan to go to PE college. I remember thinking, dear God, how are they going to pull that off?" She took another sip of her coffee, "Then you told me your subject choices, English, Biology, Art and Home Economics and I thought you both had very little chance of getting a place with those subjects. Not only were two of the subjects frowned upon by universities, unless you were specifically planning to be an artist or a chef, but you couldn't cook and Justine couldn't paint. Fortunately, the college saw the potential in both of you at the interview and awarded you both a conditional place. I am, to this day, still baffled as to how the pair of you pulled off a top grade in each of the subjects you couldn't even do the practical in." Maggie shook her head, genuinely still puzzled.

There was a knock on the door and Maggie opened it, taking a tray from the head of catering, and thanking her for bringing the food across. She put the tray on her desk between them and began to remove the metal covering from the plates and placing a chicken salad in front of Gillian.

"What did you think we were going to do after school?"

Maggie pushed her fork into her beef curry. "It was no secret that the pair of you only stayed on to do your sixth year because you wanted to play hockey for the Scottish under 18's, and Justine wanted to play Volleyball." Maggie put a forkful of food into her mouth and motioned for Gill to give hers a try. "I bet if you had known you would be selected for the under 21's that year and not the under 18's, you wouldn't have come back to school."

Gill didn't bother to deny it. "What would I have done instead?"

"I thought the pair of you would have become swimming pool attendants, I mean despite you both protesting that you hated swimming, you both got your Lifeguard qualification that summer. I remember breathing a sigh of relief at the time, knowing the pair of you would be able to do something."

Gill laughed at the memory, "We had both failed foundation maths, so thought it would be a good idea."

"I didn't even think it was possible to fail that subject unless you didn't turn up, the pair of you weren't the brightest when it came to the academic side of school."

"This is true."

Maggie narrowed her eyes, "I never asked you outright before, but did the pair of you cheat to pass those exams?"

Gill shook her head. "Both of those subjects were right at the end of the exam timetable. We had a full two weeks between the Biology and them, so we practised like mad. While I cooked my main dish and my dessert over and over, with Justine showing me how to perfect the techniques, I showed her exactly what to do for her art painting."

Maggie still wasn't convinced that they hadn't pulled some kind of scam, but that was the version Gillian wanted to give, so she accepted it.

Whilst chatting with Maggie, Gillian had absent-mindedly managed to eat a fair bit of her salad. Gill put down her knife and fork, feeling full up. The pair of them were silent as the reality of what had happened seeped back into their consciousness.

"I can't believe this has happened, Gill, I just can't believe it." Maggie shook her head.

"I know." Gill teared up again, "I've never lost anyone before, Maggie, not like this. I was so young when my Grandparents passed away, I barely remember."

Maggie looked at her former pupil. At that moment it was like looking at a twelve year old Gillian Rae again. So lost and scared, but this time there was no Justine to be there for her. Gillian didn't have anyone else as close as Justine amongst her friends or family that Maggie was aware of. "What will you do tonight, Gill?"

"Emma is coming over, I saw her at the hospital this morning."

Maybe Gill did have someone after all.

Gill drove through the mid afternoon traffic with the radio for company. The local news came on as the clock hit the hour mark. Gill absently watched the lights change ahead and got ready to move forward as she listened to the newsreader talk about a robbery that had taken place that morning.

'An Edinburgh woman has died following an accident in the city yesterday. Twenty-six year old, Justine Hill, a teacher at St. Anthony's High School was struck by a van while walking on the pavement yesterday afternoon. Her daughter remains in a stable condition in the city's Royal Hospital For Sick Children. Meanwhile in another accident...'

Gillian pressed the button to switch off the radio. It still didn't feel real. The car behind her beeped impatiently as she missed her cue to move forward. Gill shook her head to clear it and put her car in gear.

Chapter 24

Gillian stood in front of the full-length mirror in her bedroom, dressed entirely in black. She looked outside at the falling snow, there was nothing visible beyond thirty yards, everything became white. Gill went to her wardrobe and selected a long black, military style coat, then removed a black scarf and gloves from a shelf nearby. Walking through to the sitting room, she took a seat on a sofa and took time to reflect on the week that had passed. She hadn't spent a night in her own bed since her failed attempt last Friday. Instead she had gone to see Charlotte everyday, then returned late at night to the hospital and slept in a fold away bed next to the little girl. It was the only place Gillian could find any rest.

Gill's taxi beeped its arrival and she put on her winter coat and gloves, then took the short slippery walk to the cab. The fresh snow crunching beneath her black booted foot, she texted Emma as she entered the cab.

Emma stepped out of her stair and into the taxi as soon as it arrived outside her flat. Taking a seat next to Gillian, she patted her friend with a gloved hand and the pair shared a sad, watery smile. The journey through Edinburgh's snow lined streets was made in silence, there were no words to be said. Emma offering her support simply by being at Gillian's side.

Gill looked through the steam filled window, catching blurred glimpses of the busy morning traffic. Watching the people go about their daily business. She envied every last one of them, wanting to be doing anything other than attending Justine's funeral to say her final goodbye to her physical form. Emma seemed to sense Gillian's thoughts as she once again rubbed her shoulder. "You will get through this." The first words spoken between the pair that morning.

"Is this as tough as it gets?" Gillian asked through a pained expression.

"Today will bring an end to the waiting. It's the official goodbye. It will eventually get a little easier, I'm sorry, Gillian, that's all I have for you."

Gill nodded, and returned to looking out the window.

The church was draughty and cold, but filling up quickly. Relatives, friends and colleagues all making their way into the old building to pay their last respects to Justine. Gill watched from her seat in the second row, right behind Justine's grieving family, as the Minister walked in dignified silence to the pulpit. A hushed silence swept over the congregation and he began the service. Gillian felt like she was on autopilot. She was there in body, but felt a strange detachment to the proceedings. She watched as Justine's coffin was brought to the front of the church, the congregation standing respectfully as it passed them by, pain and sorrow etched on the many faces present.

Gillian felt numb as she went through the sitting, the standing, the singing and finally the personal touch when the minister began to speak about Justine, a young woman he had never met. His words didn't touch Gill. Justine was never a religious person, so these words simply didn't resonate with the person Gill knew. Finally, Justine's older brother Colin got up and made his way to the altar. He stood in front of the mic and took a moment to compose himself. He then began to speak of the younger sister he had known for all of her life. How annoying she could be as a little sister, when she would sneak into his room and pinch the latest CD's from his collection. And how she would hang around when he brought a girlfriend home and not leave them in peace. Finally the congregation began to loosen up a little, and there were some ripples of laughter. He spoke of her terrific sense of humour and her tremendous capacity for love and her care about the people close to her. Again Colin took a moment to compose himself before he continued to talk of the younger sister he had lost. "Justine was an amazing mother to Charlotte. A wonderful daughter and a terrific little sister." He spoke of the love Justine had recently found with Kenny and finally he spoke of all the lives Justine had touched and the many friends she had made in her short journey through life. "In particular her friendship with Gillian, a friendship that could endure anything, only something like this could have separated them."

Gillian bowed her head as she tried to choke back the tears and Emma again comforted her.

Finally, the funeral cortege made the short journey to the nearby cemetery for the burial and Justine's final resting-place. The snow was constant, having not let up all morning, and everyone was well wrapped up against the elements. Standing at the graveside, the minister said his final prayer and then family were called forward to take their place and hold one of the six cords attached to the coffin. The act was purely symbolic, as the cords no longer held the actual weight of the coffin, but the lowering of the coffin was real. Gillian stepped forward when her number was called, along with Kenny, Colin, Brian and Justine's sister's husbands.

Gill watched as the cord slipped through her fingers and the coffin containing the body of her friend was lowered into the ground. The wind seemed to whip up and the snow swirled around a little more fiercely as Justine's body settled in the ground.

That was it, the official part of the ceremony was over. Some people lingered at the graveside, but the majority began to make their way to the nearby hotel for hot food and drink, the cold and snow forcing them inside. Gillian stood rooted to the spot, a look of utter bewilderment on her wet face, salty tears mingling with the wet snow. Emma took her by the arm and gently guided her towards a waiting black car.

The wake was strange, there was an overall sense of relief that permeated the air and the mood was surprisingly upbeat. People chatted and caught up with each other. Gill met and spoke with many faces from her and Justine's past. Old friends from school and college, most of them talking about some memory they had of the pair and the antics they used to get up to. Finally, Gillian was exhausted and feeling like she needed to flee.

"What are your plans for the rest of the evening, Gillian?"

Gill looked around the room as she considered her options of escape before turning her attention back to Emma. "I don't want to be here any longer."

Emma nodded, sensing that the initial feeling of respite that accompanied the end of a funeral service had worn off for Gillian. "Would you like to go home?"

Gill shook her head, "No, I'm going to go and see Charlotte."

"I'll come with you."

"No, no thanks. I just want to be alone for a little while."

"Are you sure?"

Gill nodded, "Thank you for being here today."

Emma hugged her friend. "Anytime, Gillian."

"Gilly?"

"Hey, you are looking better every day." Gill kissed Charlotte on the cheek and rubbed her head. She looked at the metal surrounding the little girl's pelvic area. Hilary had told her it was an external fixator used to stabilise the pelvis as Charlotte had an unstable fracture. Hilary had assured her it would heal well, and kids were prone to heal better and more rapidly than adults, particularly with injuries to this area as there was a rich blood supply. She promised Gill, Charlotte had a terrific chance of a full recovery and would go on to live a normal healthy life with full mobility. Gill knew that Charlotte had a few tough weeks ahead of her yet, with physiotherapy and a further operation to remove the external fixator.

The little girl looked sad and lost and Gill would have given anything to be able to change that. She picked up a book that she knew had become a favourite of Charlotte's and started to read to her. "Paws the puppy looked around and knew he was lost." Gill continued to read the story of the lost little puppy who hoped to find a new home, the symbolism of the story in terms of Charlotte, not lost on her.

Thinking Charlotte had fallen asleep Gill closed the book and set it aside. Then a little voice spoke from the bed, "Gilly, where's mummy?"

Gill's reaction was instantaneous. Emotion flooded her body and she fought hard to hold back her tears. "She's with the angels, honey."

Charlotte nodded slowly, then turned her big sad eyes back to Gillian. "Will you take me home, Gilly?"

The simple, honest request was Gillian's undoing. The tears flooded her cheeks and she held Charlotte's hand. "Not yet, Charlotte," she whispered hoarsely, "You need to stay here a little longer and get better."

"Don't cry, Gilly, I will stay."

Gill nodded, she had to get out of the room, she couldn't break down in front of the little girl. She gave Charlotte's hand a squeeze, "I'll be right back, okay?" Charlotte nodded and Gill left the room, getting as far as the outside corridor before she bent down sobbing, only her hand on the wall keeping her on her feet. After a few moments, Gill felt a comforting touch on her back.

"Are you okay?" asked a concerned voice.

Gill shook her head and looked up at the kindly nurse who was comforting her. She felt totally helpless. "What do I say to her? I don't know what to say?"

The older woman rubbed her back and nodded, "It's just an awful situation for you all. Was Charlotte's mum your sister?"

Gill shook her head as she replied, "Justine was so much more..."

Friday saw Gillian wake in her own bed for the first time in a week. She had been unable to return to Charlotte's hospital room the previous evening. As Gill lay there staring at the ceiling, she wished she simply hadn't woken up, life was better when she wasn't awake. Pulling the duvet back over her she buried her head into the pillow and wept.

Gillian sat on the sofa in her living room, staring at the wall. Her hockey kit was ready and packed for tomorrow's game. She would usually be sitting having dinner with Justine and Charlotte on a Friday evening, but that was never going to happen again. She had tried watching television, then reading a book, but nothing could shift the tidal wave of emotion that was growing and swirling in the pit of her stomach. Alone in her flat, she felt like the walls were closing in on her, and she needed to escape. She needed to outrun the tidal wave that was about to crash down on her.

She went to her bedroom and took out her running tights and a long-sleeved top from a chest of drawers and put them on. She pulled on socks and running shoes, secured her flat key in the small inside zip pocket of her tights and left the flat with no specific destination in mind. Heading down the High Street, she turned right at the Scottish parliament building and into the dark shadows of Holyrood park. Running around its edges, past the back of the Palace, she outran her demons as best as she could, but as she surfaced from the darkness into the street-lamp lit road the tears started to run down her cheeks. She didn't stop, instead crossing the road onto the side of Arthur's Seat and taking the route up the side of the extinct volcano towards the ruins of St. Mary's Chapel that overlooked the dark, inky loch below.

The tears were streaming down Gill's cheeks as she reached the ruins, the wind stronger and whipping through her hair the higher up she got. She could see the castle and out over the Northside of the city towards Leith and Granton harbour, but everything was a tearstained blur. As Gill reached the grassy slope that would take her back down towards the park, she lost her footing and slipped on the greasy grass that was coated with a layer of moisture from the damp evening. Collapsing into the gorse bush undergrowth that generously covered the hillside. Breathless from her exertions, Gill lay there, hidden from the rest of the world, crying uncontrollably. She sobbed and howled until she was hoarse and emotionally spent. To the passing joggers above she sounded like a wounded animal.

Gill had no idea of how much time had passed before she finally got slowly to her feet. She started walking towards home, ignoring the curious and inquisitive looks of passers by, but instead of taking the High Street, Gill took the back road and cut through, finding herself outside Emma's flat. She rang the buzzer and waited.

"Hello?"

"It's me." Gill barely managed to form the words. The door unlocked and Gill pushed it open, then wearily walked up the first flight of stairs to Emma's flat.

At the first glance of a damp, tear stained Gillian, caked in mud and scratches, Emma took her into her arms and guided her inside.

"What happened?"

Gillian sniffed back more tears, "I went running and fell into the prickly gorse on the side of Arthur's Seat."

Emma continued to caress Gill's damp back, knowing that her friend was grieving. "Come on inside, let's get you cleaned up."

Gill nodded and wordlessly followed Emma who led her by the hand. "I'm going to get you into a hot shower, clean you up."

Again Gill nodded, barely noticing the warm air that began to seep into her the second she

entered Emma's apartment. She stood in the bathroom allowing Emma to undress her, Gill content to let the Irishwoman take control. She needed someone to take control. She felt numb, not from the cold, but from what she had experienced earlier. The total loss of emotional control had left her drained and shaken.

Once undressed, Emma led Gill under the hot spray. "Is the water temperature okay, Gillian?"

Gill simply nodded and stood under the spray with her head slightly bent, allowing the hot water to flow over her, washing away the dirt, tears and sweat as it went. She didn't flinch or protest when Emma began to massage shampoo into her scalp, instead enjoying the simple pleasure of being taken care of by another human being. As Emma rinsed the shampoo from her hair, Gill finally began to feel a little more human and picked up the soap to finish washing her body. Emma turned off the shower and helped Gill to dry herself, then put a robe on her and gave Gill a towel for her hair, before guiding her towards the living room.

"You have scratches on your face."

Gill smiled sadly at Emma, "They'll heal."

Emma nodded, "I'll put the kettle on and make some tea."

Gillian awoke the following morning in Emma's arms. The Irishwoman snoring softly beside her. For the next little while she lay there and enjoyed the simple pleasure of being held close by another human being. But it wasn't long before the emotional pain and the restlessness returned and the strange sensation of needing to lash out at something. Gill sat up and rested her head and arms on her bent knees, her fingers clenching the sheets as she attempted to make the hurt go away.

A warm hand began to rub soft circles on her back. "Are you sure you are up to playing today?"

Gill nodded, "I need to be active."

Emma understood, "Would you like some breakfast?"

Gill hesitated, about to say no, but changed her mind. "That would be lovely, thanks."

Several hours later the teammates were warming up for the game with the rest of the players. All eyes were on Gillian. She was distant and subdued, so different from the bouncy upbeat person they were used to seeing pre-match. Both Scott and Sheila had spoken to Gill, asking if she felt

up to playing. She had told them she was and they went with it, but less than five minutes into the game, it was clear that Gill was anything but ready to return to hockey. She was off the pace and her timing was gone. It wasn't a fitness issue, she simply couldn't focus no matter how much she wanted to, and it wasn't long before the opposition picked up on her lack of form.

Dunedin were at home playing the league leaders in a game that, for the first time, they should have had a genuine chance of winning, but only if Gillian could find her feet. After twenty minutes and already a goal down, Dunedin made a swift counter attack up the pitch. Gill played a one-two with Cammo, which left the goalkeeper, stranded and Gill an easy tap in. To the horror of everyone supporting Dunedin, she missed the ball completely. Gill stood with her stick in one hand, using her free hand to pinch the bridge of her nose. The opposition team already in possession of the ball and racing back up the field.

"Great Britain squad. You're having a laugh."

Gill turned to look at the opposing player. "What did you say?"

The player sneered, "You couldn't even get a game for our second team, never mind Great Britain." She jogged away before Gillian could reply.

Scott pulled Gillian off towards the end of the first half and replaced her with Fay. "You okay, Gill?"

"I'm fine, Scott, you can put me back on."

"Maybe in the second half then."

Gill nodded as she reached for a padded jacket and tracksuit bottoms to keep her body temperature up. Despite the snow on Thursday, as often happened, it was gone within twenty-four hours. Some of the sports' matches were off due to flooding, but the only problem with a plastic pitch was snow or frost. With the temperatures back above freezing, the hockey games were on, but it was beginning to look like Dunedin could have benefited from a postponement. As the game moved into the second half, Glasgow grabbed a valuable second goal, leaving Dunedin with a mountain to climb. Scott decided to gamble and put Gill back on to try to get a goal.

Gillian tried her heart out, but nothing was going her way. Finally Emma hit a ball hard across the face of goal and Gillian raced to get on the end of it, diving with her stick outstretched to get something on the ball. The speed alone did the work and as Gill's stick contacted the ball, it flew towards the roof of the goal, the keeper rooted to the spot helpless. The ball struck the keeper full on the helmet and bounced high into the air and over the goal. The goalie knew nothing of the save, but it kept the ball out of the net.

The defender who had been mouthing off to Gillian earlier again had something to say. "Picked for GB, what a joke."

Gillian ignored her, until the defender went for a ball five minutes later with Gill in close proximity. Gill ran flat out and met the ball side on to the onrushing defender wiping the woman out completely. She ended up in a heap of the pitch with Gill standing over her, staring down at her prey.

There was bedlam all around as Gill stood breathing heavily above the wide-eyed woman, who didn't move an inch while Gill stood there, stick clenched tightly in her hands. Both umpires blew hard on their whistles and several players ran towards the incident. Cammo and Sheila Muir reached the two players first and both put their hands on Gill's shoulders, guiding her away from the terrified woman beneath her. Meanwhile the opposition players were helping their teammate back to her feet, while she was muttering something about a psycho. It was the umpire who had the final say, producing a yellow card and sending Gillian to the sin bin for dangerous play.

Gill stood at the halfway line, staring at the pitch without following the action. She had never before lost her temper on a hockey field. When her ten minutes were up, the umpire signalled her back into the action, but Scott immediately substituted her. Dunedin lost the match by three goals to nil.

Back in the changing room Gill stripped off her kit in disgust, before going for a shower. Her teammates watched her go, all of them concerned for her wellbeing. Gillian didn't say a word, she simply showered and then dressed. She knew the loss was her fault, there was nothing to be said. The atmosphere in the changing room was muted. Dunedin had dropped to third place in the league following the day's defeat, but that wasn't the reason for the quiet. Gillian was hurting and she was miserable and everyone in the room could see that. Going through the motions, Gill put her kitbag in the boot of her car then went into the clubhouse for after-match teas. The conversation level in the large room noticeably dropped when she entered and you could cut the atmosphere with a knife. Gill sat at a table and when she looked around her, heads were dropping, no one could make eye contact with her. Yvonne Reynolds, the club's president, sat next to her, putting a cup of tea and a small plate of food down beside her.

"Just in case you get hungry."

Gill nodded, "Thanks, Yvonne."

The older, well-dressed woman simply nodded and rubbed Gill's shoulder, before sitting back and sipping regally on her cup of tea. Gillian sat for less than two minutes, but could be there no longer. All the players had arrived from both teams and the opposition were buoyant after their comprehensive win. Gill couldn't take it any longer and got to her feet and left. Everyone watched her go. The double hinged doors rattling behind her.

"She's taking the misses badly," came the flippant remark from one of the opposition players.

"Gillian lost her best friend in a road traffic accident last week, she buried her two days ago," Yvonne Reynolds said to everyone in earshot.

The player immediately bowed her head, feeling embarrassed. "I'm sorry."

"You weren't to know," was the simple reply from Yvonne, but it clearly said, '*you do now*'.

Hilary turned to Emma. "I'll run you back into town."

"Thanks, Hilary," but a lift home was the last thing on Emma's mind.

Emma sat at home that evening. She had gone down to Gill's flat, but the place was in darkness, and she had tried calling her friend's mobile phone several times, but it instantly went to voicemail each time. Finally, as the clock ticked towards midnight, she walked into town, past the playhouse to look in the few bars that Gillian often frequented on weekends. C.C. Blooms was first, so she popped in and had a look around, it wasn't really busy yet, but it soon would be. There was no sign of Gillian, so she walked further down the street to The Planet. She saw Gillian straight away as she looked down the long pub. She was sitting at the bar with a couple of women, one of whom was all over her, but Gillian didn't seem to mind as she openly fondled the woman's breasts. Emma almost turned around and walked back home, but she couldn't. Gillian was vulnerable right now, and she couldn't walk away. As she got closer, it was obvious that Gillian was very drunk, but the situation didn't look right to Emma. The other woman seemed to be eyeing Gill up, but not as a potential conquest, something was off and she trusted her instincts.

"Gillian."

Gill looked at Emma and smiled, "Hey you."

"I've come to take you home."

"I don't think so, she's with me." The woman Gill was fondling, stood in front of Gillian, effectively blocking Emma from getting to her.

"Get your hands off my girlfriend!"

The woman got the message and stepped out of the way. Gillian was giggling, "You better stay back, she knows origami." Gill started laughing at her own joke.

"Shut up, Gillian." Emma took Gill by the arm and led her from the bar.

"I always knew you wanted me," Gill slurred. She was staggering and Emma was having to hold her and guide her in the right direction. They had no chance of a taxi at that time, walking would be best.

As they walked towards home, Gill wouldn't stop talking. "You've become my knight in Papier-mâché armour."

Emma started to laugh a little, almost regretting explaining Occupational Therapy in detail to Gillian. "You know I don't do any of that. Art and design was a small part of my course, but I've chosen to specialise in orthopaedics."

Gill thought of a very rude joke about Hilary, but kept it to herself, instead she started singing loudly. "Sean, I'd say the best one came from Tupelo, Mississippi. I'll tell you now that grown men cry and Irish girls are pretty." Gill started giggling again as Emma looked around them, hoping no one was hearing this. "You are you know. You're very pretty."

"Don't you dare kiss me, Gillian," Emma warned.

"I can't kiss you, because Hilary will come after me and she has power tools. She'll amputate my fingers." Gill was giggling again and Emma shook her head at her antics. Gill was going to be suffering a major hangover in the morning.

Chapter 25

"Hi, Hilary, can I have a word?"

Hilary looked around, sensing that Gill needed to talk to her in private. It had been three weeks now since the accident and Gill was slowly beginning to find a bit of her old self. "Sure." She led them back towards the now empty pitch. "How are you doing, Gill?"

"I'm getting by, you know, it's a little bit tough."

"I'm sure, look, is there something you need? Anything, you just have to ask, you know that, Gill."

"I know." Gill took a deep breath, not wanting to have this conversation with Hilary, but knowing she had to be truthful. "I want to thank you for being so patient and understanding."

Hilary frowned, not sure what Gill was talking about. "About?"

"Well, about Emma spending so much time with me. You haven't complained or said a word. I appreciate that you have been so great about it."

"Why would you be thanking me, Gill?"

"Emma is your girlfriend, why wouldn't I thank you?"

"Emma isn't my girlfriend."

"There's no need to split hairs, I thought you would have gone past the dating stage by now."

"Gill, hasn't she told you? We haven't been seeing each other since the New Year sprint."

Gillian stared open mouthed at Hilary. "What?"

"It didn't work out between us, that was one of the reasons we kept things quiet. Less hassle that way if it doesn't work out. We don't have all the team tiptoeing around us."

"I had no idea."

Hilary shrugged, "No big deal, it wasn't meant to be. We're friends, but that's it."

"How could it not work out? She's amazing," Gill blurted out.

Hilary nodded, "Yes, but she has feelings for someone else."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Hilary. I thought she was over her ex."

Hilary shook her head and wanted to throttle Gillian, but refrained and resorted to a bit of verbal abuse instead. "You can be a right gormless idiot at times, Gill."

"What? What did I do now?"

"Nothing."

Hilary walked off and Gill stared at her departing form wondering what on earth that was all about.

Gill shook her head and walked towards the car park looking for Emma, but the OT had long gone, cycling home on her bike. The final numbers for the Easter trip to the Dublin hockey festival were to be confirmed by the weekend. Gillian had asked Emma if she was going, but she had remained undecided, knowing that her ex girlfriend would be there. Obviously Emma hadn't confided that piece of information to Hilary, or the doctor would have been more aware.

Gill opened her car door and got in. Emma had agreed to accompany her on an errand tomorrow, so that gave her tomorrow evening and Saturday morning to talk the Irishwoman into committing to going to Dublin. She really hoped that Emma would come along.

"Is that Gillian Rae running around the field with a puppy?"

Hilary nodded. She was standing on the edge of the playing fields looking out at Gill and Emma

who were indeed playing with a little brown puppy. "It is indeed."

"Have that pair finally worked something out?"

Hilary looked at Laura MacDonald, "No. Emma thinks Gillian is only after a one night stand and Gillian thinks Emma is still in love with her ex girlfriend."

"Hopeless."

Hilary nodded thoughtfully and watched the threesome a little longer. *'Hopelessly in love is more like it.'*

"Who the hell owns that yappie little thing?"

Gillian beamed, "I do."

"You have a dog?"

"I do indeed have a dog."

Hilary stared in disbelief, "I don't believe you."

Gill shrugged and continued walking the little chocolate brown Labrador around the grass, pooper scooper in hand, just in case. Hilary walked after her, "You really own this thing?"

"I do."

"Since when?"

"Last night."

"Why?"

Gillian stopped walking, "Paws, be good." The dog continued to snap at Hilary's training shoes. "He can sense your hostility."

"Don't be ridiculous, now tell me why you have a dog?"

Gill sighed, "I have a plan. You see, Charlotte is so down and missing her mum. There are two things in the hospital that she adores. A picture of her mother and a book about a lost little puppy looking for a home. This pup is identical to the one in the book. Hilary, meet Paws. I got him for Charlotte, but if she doesn't want him or if Pauline is unable to cope with him, I'm fully prepared to be his full-time owner."

Hilary gave Gillian a hug. "You surprise me sometimes, Gill, but I should know better."

"My plan is, that when Charlotte is allowed home from the hospital, I will take Paws to meet her and see how they get along. I'm hoping they become best of friends. If not, well meet my new pet."

Hilary crouched down to greet the little pup and it instantly started to lick her fingers.

"I told you he sensed your hostility, look, he likes you now."

"How old is this thing?"

"Paws," Gill corrected, "Twelve weeks."

"He's cute. I'm sure Charlotte will love him."

"Are puppies allowed in the hospital?"

"Of course not! They carry all kinds of diseases." Hilary was incredulous, "Don't you go doing anything stupid like smuggling that thing into the hospital."

"I was only thinking I could take him to see Charlotte, give her something to look forward to." Paws was yapping again, "And stop with the doctor tone, you're upsetting him."

"What about a picture?" Hilary was more conciliatory, but she doubted the pup was picking up on her vibes.

Gill considered that, "It could work, good suggestion, Hilary." The dog stopped yapping and Gill gave Hilary a look that clearly said *I told you so*.

"Good doggy."

"Thank god you weren't a vet either," Gill laughed. "I have to go find someone who will watch Paws while we play today. See you in a few minutes."

Hilary watched as Gillian walked over to some of the spectators who had gathered. She had to admit that if Paws had the same effect on Charlotte that he was having on Gillian, then Gillian was on to a winner with her idea.

"Well played, Gillian."

"Thanks, Yvonne. It was nice to be back amongst the goals."

"I have to say, you weren't the star attraction today." Yvonne looked down at Paws, "He stole the

show."

Gill laughed, "Isn't he cute?"

"Adorable."

"Right, girls, we need to finalise the numbers for Dublin. If you commit today, you're paying no matter what." Sheila's booming voice grabbed everyone's attention. "I'm passing around a sheet, put your name on it and I want a check right now for one hundred pounds." There were a few groans, "Come on, it's not like we haven't been discussing this since the start of the year. We have nine definite already *with* deposits paid." Sheila passed the sheet to Hilary and the players began adding their names to it.

"Gillian you can't pay cash," Sheila complained.

"I don't have a clue where my chequebook is."

"You're dodgy, that's why you always use cash," remarked a heavily pregnant Julie Reid.

"Should you even be here? You look like you are about to drop. You're scaring me. Hilary sit next to Julie, just in case."

Hilary sighed, "Give me your cash, I'll write a cheque for two hundred, and calm down, Julie is fine."

Sheila gathered in the sheet and the cheques and ran a finger down the names. "Okay, that's most of the first team going."

"Who isn't?"

"Well, obviously Julie won't be going. Also Sue."

"I'm off to the Bahamas."

"Right, let's see, Melinda isn't coming, she's going home to visit her parents during the Easter break."

"I won't have been home since Christmas," said the teenage student. "But I would have loved to be coming along."

"Maybe next year, Melinda?" Gill added, hoping the student would be remaining with the club.

"I hope so."

"That leaves Sarah and Emma."

"I can't get the time off work, Easter is busy for the police."

"More like won't pass up the overtime," Laura remarked.

Sarah didn't reply to the thinly veiled accusation, she always worked when there wasn't a league or cup game. Finally, all eyes were on Emma waiting to hear why she wasn't going to Dublin.

"I ah, well I really don't have an excuse. It's more a personal thing."

"Wouldn't you be visiting home anyway? You can kill two birds with one stone."

"Eww, Laura, you are such a scientist. Animal cruelty," Melinda joked.

"Linda kills the rats, not me."

Linda rolled her eyes, "Don't give me that, most, if not all of you, eat meat and use products tested on animals." She stared everyone out.

Gill looked to Emma, she knew her friend was uncomfortable with the scrutiny. They had spoken about the Dublin trip and Emma really wanted to go, but she had remained undecided knowing her ex girlfriend would be around all weekend. "Does it absolutely have to be today, Sheila?"

"Sorry, Gill, but it does. I'm booking the flights tomorrow."

"Come on, Emma, you can be our tour guide." Laura encouraged.

"Yeah, Emma, you can show us all the good places to go."

Emma's teammates continued to encourage her into committing to the trip until she finally caved and agreed to go. "Alright, alright. I'll go."

"Are you sure?" Gillian asked.

Emma nodded, "I really do want to go."

"Great, a couple of the second team players are coming along too, so we have good numbers." Everyone looked at Sheila wondering the same thing. "Caroline and Jane will be joining us."

There were sighs of relief, many of the first team fearing that Valerie Smith was coming along to wreck their fun weekend.

"Well, I need to get Paws home for his dinner."

There was outright laughter all around. "I never thought I would hear those words out of your mouth on a Saturday night, Gillian Rae," Yvonne Reynolds remarked.

Gill frowned, "I'm a changed woman and I need to feed my dog." She looked to Emma, "Do you need a lift?"

"That would be great, Gillian, thanks."

Most eyes were on the pair as they left with Paws walking alongside them. "Looks like a happy family to me," Laura remarked.

"Something is in the air, that's for sure," Sheila added.

"Are you sure you're really up for the trip to Dublin?" Gill asked as they drove back towards the Royal Mile.

"I really am looking forward to the trip. I know they are always a lot of fun, I'm just not looking forward to being around my ex."

"Will she definitely be there?"

"You can count on it."

Gill concentrated on driving for a short bit, but she was desperate to mention Hilary. Finally, she gave in to temptation. "I was chatting with Hilary on Thursday evening. She told me the two of you weren't dating anymore."

"Oh, yes, it didn't work out for us. We both recognised it was best to stop."

"It's a shame, she's a great catch."

Emma looked at Gill, "You didn't think so."

"Fair point." Gill decided to change the subject, "You want to come on a walk later with Paws and me?"

Emma smiled, "Would love to."

"We're going down to the beach tomorrow to chase seagulls," the invitation was clear.

Emma laughed, "Will you be the one chasing the gulls?"

Gill smiled and looked at Emma, "Probably," then laughed.

Chapter 26

Gillian sat in her car outside the home of Pauline and Brian Brook. She looked at Paws in his plastic dog crate in the back seat, he was quiet, but Gill knew that as soon as she moved out of her seat, he would start yelping with excitement, knowing he was getting out of the crate. Gill was having second thoughts. Charlotte was inside after being discharged from hospital that afternoon, Gillian hoped she hadn't made a mistake with the puppy. The little girl had no idea that Gill had purchased Paws, the hope was that her eyes would light up, it seemed like a good idea a few weeks ago, but now...

Taking a deep breath, Gill got out of the driver's seat and opened the backdoor to let Paws out. The pup was already excited. Gill clipped the lead to his collar, before lowering him to the pavement. "Be good, Paws, you're going to meet Charlotte and you need to be on your best behaviour." The pup was shaking with excitement, completely oblivious to the importance of the next few minutes.

Gill rubbed her sweaty palms on her jeans as she waited for the door to be opened. "Hi, Pauline."

"Gillian, good to see you." The pair hugged as Gill entered the house.

"How's Charlotte?"

"Ah, she's okay. She, ah, still thinks that she will be going home. She doesn't understand that this is her new home."

Gill laid a hand on Pauline's shoulder, "She will eventually get it."

Pauline choked back tears. Eight weeks on and everything was still so fresh. "This must be Paws." She bent down to greet the pup, "He's gorgeous, Gill."

"Remember, Pauline, I will keep him if this doesn't work out. There is no pressure here."

"Oh, I know, Gillian. The therapist says we should build up the relationship slowly, especially at first. Charlotte will get easily tired. Also her hips won't be up to too much play at the moment."

Gill nodded, "Let's introduce them and see how things go."

They walked to the sitting room, where Charlotte was resting on the sofa. "Charlotte, you have a visitor," Pauline said softly.

The little girl looked up and Gill popped her head around the door. "Gilly." It was a muted greeting in comparison to the past, but there was a smile.

Gill returned the smile and walked into the room. "I've brought someone to me..."

"Paws!"

"Don't get up, Paws will come to you," Gill cautioned.

"You saved him, Gilly," Charlotte spoke so earnestly, it brought a lump to Gill's throat.

"Well, he was looking for a new home."

Charlotte gently patted Paws and the pup licked her fingers. The little girl giggled for the first time in weeks. She looked up at Gillian with hope in her eyes. "Can we keep him?"

Gillian wasn't sure how to answer the question and looked to Pauline for help.

"We need to let you get better before we can think about having Paws over to stay. Until then, Gillian will be taking care of him."

"You'll bring Paws back, Gilly?"

"Every time I come to visit, Paws will be with me." Gill looked on as Paws simply laid his head on Charlotte's lap and let the little girl stroke his fur.

Gill caught Pauline's eye and the older woman motioned towards the kitchen. Gill followed, leaving Charlotte with Paws and Brian. "What's wrong, Pauline?" The older woman looked flustered, Gill hadn't noticed until now.

"She keeps asking for her mum and I don't know what to tell her, Gillian. I tell her mummy has gone to be with the angels, but she still thinks her mum is going to visit soon."

Gill took Pauline in her arms and held her. "It's going to be really tough for a while, but she will start to ask less and less."

Pauline started to sob, "That's the part I'm dreading, when she starts to forget Justine."

Gill hadn't thought about that. Charlotte was only four, she would hardly remember anything of her mum. "We can tell her, Pauline. She will know how wonderful her mother was." Gill felt the older woman nod against her shoulder.

"Goodness, I'm sorry, Gillian." Pauline wiped her eyes and blew her nose on a tissue.

"No, don't apologise."

They separated and sat at the kitchen table. "How have you been holding up? I haven't really had a chance to ask you." Pauline tucked her tissue into the sleeve of her jumper.

Gill fought back her own tears, "Life is different, Pauline." The older woman passed the box of tissues to Gill. "Thanks."

"You two were a big part of each other's lives for so long, you knew her better than anyone."

Justine squeezed Pauline's hand. "She was the best friend I could ever have. A truly wonderful person." Gill paused to compose herself. "It's still so unbelievable."

Pauline nodded, "I know. I keep thinking why? Why did this happen? Had she been a few seconds earlier or later, she would still be here. It's just so random." There was a hint of frustration in the older woman's voice.

Gillian had been over the same thoughts in her head a hundred times a day, and it never made sense. It was simply a random event, but one that resulted in Justine's untimely death. The decisions and actions of two people colliding and ending in tragedy. Sometimes Gillian felt such anger towards the driver she could barely breathe.

Brian popped his head into the kitchen. "Charlotte is getting tired," he said, not unkindly.

Gill nodded, "Time to take Paws home." She stood up to leave the kitchen.

"Gillian?"

"Yes?"

"It looks really promising, the dog I mean. When Charlotte is strong enough, we'll take him."

Gill nodded, "You can change your mind at anytime, Pauline."

They walked through to the sitting room, where Charlotte had fallen asleep, Paws still resting beside her. Gill gently lifted the pup down to the carpet and attached his lead. "At least there is no hassle taking him away this time," she whispered. "I'll see you both tomorrow."

Brian nodded, and Pauline walked Gill to the front door. "You don't have to come by every day."

"I know, but as long as I can make it, I'll be over, if that's alright with you and Brian?"

"Of course, Gillian, no need to ask."

Gill gave Pauline a quick peck on the cheek, "See you tomorrow."

"Bye, Gill."

Emma watched as Gill silently walked around the park with Paws. The teacher had been quiet, hardly saying two words to her. "Tough day, Gillian?"

"Hmm? Oh, kind of. It was really hard seeing Justine's mum today. More difficult than when we met at the hospital."

Emma nodded, "How's Charlotte doing?"

"Quiet. She's really quiet."

They came upon a park bench and Gill sat on it, Emma joined her. "It's just so sad, Emma. Bewildering and sad, I'm still struggling to get my head around it." Gill lay her head on Emma's shoulder, "Tell me something about you, Emma?"

Emma frowned, momentarily thrown by the change in direction, but quickly understanding that Gill needed to talk about something other than her hurt. "What would you like to know?"

"Tell me about your family?"

"Not much to tell really."

"Are you close? Do you have brothers and sisters?"

"I have an older brother and a younger sister."

"What do they do?"

"Well, my brother is an Insurance Broker and my sister is a nun."

"Really? A Nun?"

"Yes, really. My sister entered the convent when she was eighteen."

Gill was quiet for a moment. "Wow, a nun, that's ... wow."

Emma laughed lightly. "It was a shock to all the family as well."

"But your parents are okay with it?"

"They are, after they got over the initial shock, they're very proud of her."

"What's your sister's name?"

"Sister Dolores."

"Is that like a special nun name?"

"Yes, she was Julia."

"Do you get to see her much?"

"We write often and when I go home, I visit her at the convent."

"Will you be visiting her at Easter?"

"I hope to."

Gill nodded, "It's getting late, we better get this little man home."

Emma looked at Paws who had simply snuggled on top of Gillian's walking boot. "Looks like you might be carrying him home."

Gill bent down and picked the pup up, "It's been a busy day, poor wee laddie."

Emma laughed.

"What?"

"It's cute when you use Scottish words."

"Aye?"

"Now you're just showing off."

"Oh, a kin use a loat o' Scottish wurd's ye ken, hen."

Emma pushed Gill on the shoulder. "I have no idea what you just said."

"I said, I can use a lot of Scottish words you know, girl."

Emma shook her head, "Sometimes I have no idea what my patients are saying."

"I wouldn't worry, sometimes I can barely understand the students and I was born here."

The pair laughed as they made their way back towards the High Street.

Chapter 27

"Are you sure about this, Gillian? I usually walk down to the station to get the airport bus."

"Relax, Emma. This bus goes all the way to the airport it just takes a little longer."

"I wish I had known this sooner, it comes right up the Royal Mile, but I feel like we will be thrown off for fare dodging."

"Would you relax, it's a flat fare, doesn't matter if we go one stop or ninety stops, it's still £1.20." Gill laughed, "There is one drawback."

"I knew it, what?"

"You are stuck with me for over an hour instead of thirty minutes."

"So we are taking the scenic route?"

"Pretty much."

"I don't mind that, I will get to see some of the city I haven't had a chance to look at yet."

"I'm really looking forward to seeing Dublin, I've never been before."

"I think you will like it." Emma sounded a little subdued, unlike Gillian who was feeling excited at the prospect.

"Are you really dreading seeing your ex?" Gill sat slouched on the bus seat she was sharing with Emma, but the Irishwoman's posture, as always, remained perfect.

"A little."

"Hey, can I come up to the hospital and have lunch with you next week?"

The sudden switch in conversation momentarily confused Emma, but she was becoming used to Gill's flighty tendencies. "Sure, are you going there for a specific reason?"

Gill smiled, "Yes, to see you in uniform."

Laughing Emma answered, "It's nothing too flattering."

Gill shrugged, "What about Tuesday?"

"Should be fine, my lunch hour starts at 12.30. I'll meet you in the main cafeteria."

"Great."

They arrived early for their flight, as instructed by Sheila. The captain didn't want any last minute hiccups at the airport.

"There's Sheila, she looks flustered," Emma remarked.

"Where have you two been?"

"We're early." Gill protested.

"You're last."

"But we're early."

Emma put her hand on Sheila's shoulder. "Relax, everyone has arrived on time. I've taken this flight a few times now, I'll help you out."

"Oh, thanks, Emma. I'm just a bit stressed."

Emma smiled and looked for the Ryanair check-in desk. "Let's get in line, it's busy so we may as well get this part over with."

With the luggage checked in and boarding passes in hand, the team headed up the escalator, towards security. Everyone took a tray and put their hand luggage in it, followed by their jacket, shoes, belt, loose coins and jewellery.

Gill popped her tray on the conveyor belt for scanning, then walked through the electronic gate, which beeped.

There was laughter from her teammates at Gill's look of bewilderment.

"Excuse me, could you stand to the side and put your arms out."

Gill looked at the serious woman, it wasn't a question or request, it was an order. Doing as asked, Gill stood waiting to be searched. The security woman stood directly in front of Gill and stared intimidatingly into her face. She tried not to giggle as she peered over the woman's head, topping her by a good four inches. All her teammates cheering didn't help, especially when the search began. Gill's eyes almost popped out of her head when her chest was quickly but firmly criss-crossed, and the bottom of her breasts cupped. The security woman slid her hands down the outside of Gill's arms, then back up the inside, before sliding them to her shoulder blades, bringing their bodies together. The woman then slid her hands down Gill's back, briefly skimming over her buttocks before dropping to her knees. There were howls of laughter from her teammates, as the security woman's head was right in front of Gill's crotch. The woman used both hands to frisk Gill's right leg from the ankle up, then she literally cupped her crotch, which

made Gill shriek, before the guard slid her hands down the other leg. The woman then calmly stood up, looked at Gill and grinned. "That's you done. Have a safe journey."

Gill then looked around thinking the entire episode had been a joke, surely no one was frisked in such an intimate manner, but it was real. Lost for words Gill walked over to her teammates. "Did you see that? I was molested!"

Hilary could barely speak, she had found the entire display so funny. "You should have seen your face when she palmed your breasts. Then you shrieked like a little girl when she cupped your groin."

"Hilary, how can that be allowed? I should complain. I've just been felt up!"

"Come on, Gill, let's get to the bar," Laura suggested, trying to keep a straight face.

"That woman is nutty!" Gill pointed back towards the security area.

"Come on, let's just get out of here before she decides to do all of us," Sheila cautioned, which had the rest of the team gathering their belongings and walking briskly towards the bar.

The team gathered in one of the small bars and waited for their flight to be called. They were in good spirits, looking forward to the weekend ahead. "Linda, you're very quiet, is everything alright?" Emma asked the highly-strung scientist.

"I'll be fine once we land in Dublin."

"Not too fond of flying?"

"No, I hate it."

Gill placed a double vodka and coke in front of the petrified woman, "There, that will help."

"Don't get her too drunk, Gill, or she won't be allowed on the flight," Sheila warned.

"She'll be fine, she's only had four drinks."

Linda grabbed Gill by the wrist, "I want to sit between you and Hilary."

Gill looked at the white knuckled grip Linda had on her and nodded, "No problem." She rubbed Linda's hand and the woman eased her grip. "It will be fine, Linda, we will look after you."

Almost an hour later Linda was sitting on the plane between Gillian and Hilary, her lap belt firmly in place and a tight grip on their hands. The speaker system crackled to life and the pilot spoke for the first time. "*Laydeez and Gentlemen, get ready for zee pick off.*"

Linda looked frantically from Gillian to Hilary, "Oh, dear God, did he just say pick off?"

"No, no, it was take off, wasn't it, Hilary?"

"Yes, it was definitely take off."

They watched as Linda turned chalk white, and Hilary attempted to get the attention of a stewardess. "Excuse me, can we have a sick bag please?"

The stewardess replied in heavily accented English, "No, no sick bags. If she sick, you pay three hundred euro." Then promptly walked off.

"Bloody hell, how rude." Hilary was unimpressed.

Emma handed over a paper bag from her rucksack. "When they say budget airline, they really mean it."

"You're not kidding." Hilary took the bag and handed it to Linda, not sure whether she was going to need to breathe into it, or throw up in it.

Fifty minutes later they touched down in Dublin, or as the pilot had called it, 'Dub'. Linda got off the plane on wobbly legs, delighted to be back on terra firma. "They should rename them Shaky jets," the pale woman complained.

"Come on, let's collect our bags and get to the hotel, and no more alcohol for you, Linda, or you will be hung over tomorrow."

"I'm going to bed."

"Good idea," Hilary agreed.

A forty-five minute minibus ride later and the team arrived at 'Jury's Inn', their accommodation for the next three nights.

"Okay, everyone has their keycard, meet back down here at 7.30 p.m, for a buffet reception for all the teams."

Gill got into the elevator and made her way to the third floor and her room.

"Why has almost everyone got a double room to themselves?"

Gill smiled at Emma, "They might get some company and, trust me, some will already have someone flying over from Scotland to join them."

"Their partners?"

"I doubt it."

"Oh, I see."

"Have you never been on tour before?"

"No."

Gill smiled, "I'll see you downstairs in a little while, I'm going to freshen up."

"Why do you have one?"

"A double room?" Gill asked. Emma nodded. "Maybe for the same reason that you do." They held eye contact for a few seconds, before Gill smiled and opened her room door.

The reception was very busy, with seven teams taking part in the tournament. One from Scotland, two from England and four Irish teams, that meant six games in two days. It was a heavy schedule. They stood around chatting, drinking free wine and eating sandwiches, while the teams were introduced and the captains picked up the itinerary for the next two days.

"Hello, Emma, I thought I might see you here."

Gill turned to see a tall, dark haired, Irishwoman greeting her friend and she just knew that this was Emma's ex.

"Orla, it's nice to see you. How are you?"

"I'm well, how's Scotland?"

"I'm enjoying it."

"Good." The woman held eye contact with Emma, smiling.

"Orla, these are my teammates, Gillian Rae and Hilary Duffy."

"Gillian, Hilary, this is Orla Ryan."

Orla shook their hands with a firm grip. "So you're Gillian Rae, I heard you were going to grace us with your presence. It's not often we get to play against one of the best in Great Britain."

"I only train with the squad. I don't have any caps."

"Modest too," Orla remarked as she gave Gillian a quick once over.

"It's only a matter of time, I'm sure the next match GB play, you will gain your first cap, Gillian."

"Thanks, Emma."

Orla watched the exchange between the pair with interest. "We play on Sunday, I'm really looking forward to it." She turned to Emma, "I'll see you around, I've missed you," then walked off to join her friends.

"Was that..."

"Orla Ryan, my ex."

Gill nodded, "She seems nice."

"She can be very charming." Emma watched as Orla blended back into the crowd, "I'll be back in a few minutes, I see someone I know."

Hilary and Gill watched Emma walk towards another group of players. Hilary then turned to Gillian, "Well that was interesting."

"I can certainly see the attraction."

"I suppose."

"You don't think she is attractive?"

"Oh, there's no doubt about that, I was more interested in what wasn't being said."

Gill agreed, "I have a feeling she wants Emma back."

"I do too."

Gill groaned inside, that was all she needed, Emma running back to Ireland to rekindle her relationship with Orla, and did she have to be so damn good looking?

"Wakey, wakey." Gill stood outside Emma's hotel room door waiting for the occupant to make an appearance. "Well, can I come in?"

Emma stood aside, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"I thought you were a morning person?"

"Normally I am, but not when I don't get a good night's sleep."

"Bed too soft, too hard?" Gill sat on it to check.

"No, it was more to do with the bed in the other room banging off the wall for most of the night."

Gill smiled impishly, "Who's in there?" she motioned her head to the wall.

"Going by what I heard last night it's, Oh God and Jesus Christ." Emma sat on the end of the bed, her mind still in disarray.

"Be right back."

She watched as Gill left her room and heard her knock on the next door. "It's Gillian."

The door opened and Karen Crawford stood on the other side. Gill couldn't help but think it was always the quiet ones. You barely noticed the woman most of the time. "Morning, Gill."

"Sleep well?"

Karen attempted to pull her robe closed and pat down her bed hair. "Ah, well enough, you know, a strange bed takes a bit of getting used to."

Gill nodded, "Do you have any tape?"

"Oh, I don't think so, but I'll pop some through to you if I find it. Are you next door?" The woman had the good grace to blush.

"No, Emma's in 221, I'm in 220."

"Okay, if not I'll see you at breakfast."

"Okay, see you." Gill walked back to Emma's room, the Irish woman was getting ready to shower.

"You won't believe who it is," Gill whispered.

"Tell me?"

"Karen Crawford."

Emma's eyes widened, "No way."

"Bed hair and everything."

"It's always the quiet ones."

"My thoughts exactly."

Emma started to giggle, "I'm not going to be able to look at her the same way again after what I heard last night."

"I doubt she will be looking in your direction anyway, she knows we are onto her."

"I need to shower."

"Okay, are you going to visit your sister today?"

"No, why?"

"I want to come along."

"Again, why?" Emma was suspicious.

"It's the nun thing, it's really intriguing."

"Gillian, they are just people."

"Well that's easy for you to say, your sister is one and you have grown up with this stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Religion."

Emma rolled her eyes, "What exactly are you expecting?"

"I've never met a nun, or seen a convent."

"Gillian, my sister isn't in a convent, she lives in a house with other sisters." Gill looked so disappointed Emma took pity on her. "Look, tomorrow morning, they sell flowers across the road at Christ Church Cathedral, you can come over with me."

"Really? Aww, thanks, Emma."

"Now go, I have to shower, I'll see you at breakfast."

Gill sat next to Hilary at one of the breakfast tables. "Six games in two days, we're not going to get to see very much of Dublin."

"Haven't you been before?"

"No, but you obviously have."

"Twice actually. Once for a wedding and another time for a woman."

"Do tell, Hilary."

"Not much to tell, the wedding ended in divorce three years later and the woman lasted less than four months."

"You're just full of the joys of spring." Gillian picked some fruit from the bowl on the table.

"Tsk, tsk, just because Emma's girlfriend is on the scene, no need to be moody."

"Ex girlfriend."

"I stand corrected."

Gill changed the subject, "What did you do last night?"

"Went to bed alone."

"Seems to be a common theme these days."

"Exactly how long have you gone without sex?"

"This year."

"Yes, this year."

"No, I mean, all of this year."

Hilary stared disbelievingly at Gill, "No way."

"Really, not since Zoe, the night of the New Year's sprint."

"Well, I suppose a lot has happened since then."

Gill nodded and watched as Karen Crawford walked into the room. "Someone has been busy though." She motioned towards Karen.

Hilary frowned, "Karen?"

"Yes, according to Emma, who is not one for gossip, headboard banging off the wall all night. She didn't get much sleep and obviously neither did Karen."

Hilary watched as Karen made her way to the long tables full of breakfast foods. "Is she walking

funny?"

"Like she just got off a horse."

"Who was she with?"

"No idea."

Hilary looked around the room. "That guy in the corner, he looks familiar."

"Oh, the one watching Karen, you mean? Yeah he does."

Laura joined them at the table. "I see Karen has brought Mike Mitchell over."

"Is that the guy in the corner?"

"Yes, he plays rugby for Dunedin."

"That's why he looks familiar. What other news do you have?"

"Hilary, you are the worst for gossip," Gillian protested.

The doctor shrugged, "It's a big part of hospital life." She turned back to Laura, "You were saying?"

"Minibus leaves in fifteen minutes, ladies!" Sheila's commanding voice interrupted the chat.

"Don't be late."

The Dunedin players returned to the hotel late in the afternoon weary from their exertions, but having triumphed in all three games they had played.

"Damn my legs ache." Hilary complained.

"My feet hurt."

"It's my back."

"I want a hot bath and a nap."

"You're all turning into old women," Gill proclaimed.

"Listen to super fit."

"Actually joking apart, you are, Gill, fitter, what's going on?" Hilary asked.

Gill shrugged, "I have this fitness programme to follow from the GB coach, and there are nutrition guidelines too."

"Ooooh. Get you."

"Stop it." Gill laughed, "I'm taking this seriously, if I want to play, I have to put in the extra work."

"I think it's brilliant, Gill," Hilary said genuinely.

"Anyway, what are the plans for this evening?" Gillian asked, changing the subject.

"We're booked in at a restaurant called Thunder Road, it's in Temple Bar, after that you can suit yourselves, but remember we have three more games tomorrow."

"You're doing a great job as organiser, Sheila," Laura remarked.

"Thanks, meet in reception at 7.00 p.m, we are booked for 7.30 p.m."

"I won't be able to make the meal, I'm going to see my parents and then I'm meeting up with friends, but I'll see you all tomorrow morning, if not before."

"Okay, Emma, have a nice time." The sentiment was echoed by all of the team before they started to disperse, making their way to their rooms.

Gill's mood immediately soured, thinking that Emma could be meeting Orla Ryan later that evening. The woman had been around them all day and, although she was nice enough, Gill had taken a dislike to her because she obviously wanted Emma back. "See you later, Emma."

"Bye, Gill."

"Come on, Gill, we are going to a gay bar."

"I've sworn off them."

"Don't be such a prude, we are on tour."

"Aww, Hilary, you don't need me to go."

"Come on, I'm feeling horny."

That statement caught Gill's interest. "*You* are going to have a one night stand?"

"Maybe."

"This I must see. Okay, I'm in."

Everyone stood on the street looking around.

"What's the problem?"

"I have no idea where the nearest gay bar is."

Gill rolled her eyes and looked around. "Ask that woman over there."

"She's not gay."

"She doesn't have to be." Gill took matters into her own hands and walked over to the well-dressed woman. "Excuse me."

"Yes."

"Can you tell me where the nearest gay bar is?"

"What kind of night are you looking for?"

"Busy, a bit of dancing, that kind of thing."

"You'll want The George then. Okay, let's see. Turn right, walk to the end of the street, Trinity college will be on your right, walk up Dame Street and you will come to the centre store and a traffic crossing. Cross over and walk straight on to George Street, the George is on your right."

Gill tried to retain the instructions in her head, but knew she would struggle. "You wouldn't happen to be interested in coming along to the bar with us?" Gill looked the woman over, tallish, blonde, great figure. Hilary would definitely go for her.

"Are you hitting on me?"

"Kind of, but not for me. The group behind us, see the tall woman, curvy figure, lots of dark hair?" Gill waited as the woman looked at Hilary. "She's looking for company and you are just her type."

The woman pursed her lips then nodded, "I'll walk with you."

"Great, I'm Gillian."

"Naimh De Rossa."

"Oh, is that Italian?"

"No, it's Irish. The English translation would be Eve Ross."

"Lovely, I like the Irish form. Come on, I'll introduce you to the girls." They walked across the road to the waiting team members.

"Everyone, this is Naimh and she has kindly agreed to walk with us to The George."

"Hi, Naimh." The players chorused.

Gillian made the introductions, deliberately leaving Hilary until last. "Naimh, this is Doctor Hilary Duffy, orthopaedic surgeon."

"A pleasure." Naimh shook Hilary's hand, immediately rendering the doctor speechless, a very rare happening and Gillian knew she was hooked.

The bar was big and busy. Taking up two floors, it was more of a nightclub. The crowd was mixed and varied, a little something for everyone. With her teammates starting to settle in for a night of clubbing, Gill took herself and her bottled water for a wander through the place. Catching sight of a familiar face through the throng of patrons, Gill stopped in her tracks. Staring back at her was Orla Ryan and both looked equally interested to see the other. Gill watched as the taller woman made her way towards her.

"Hi, Gillian."

"Orla." Both women were fighting to make themselves heard above the music.

"Are you here alone?"

Gill leaned in closer, "No, I'm here with some of my team."

"Is Emma with you?"

Gill had been thinking Emma was with Orla, so the question was an unexpected one. "No, she went to see her parents tonight."

Orla looked disappointed and Gill didn't miss it, but Gill was pleased Emma wasn't with the good-looking woman.

"How are you enjoying Dublin?"

"I haven't had a chance to see much of the city, which is a shame, but I've been impressed with what I have seen, lots of pretty women."

"The Scots aren't too shabby in that department either," Orla stated, then took a drink of her beer.

Gillian wondered if Orla was flirting with her. "Well that's certainly been my impression too over the years."

"If what I've been hearing is true, you've certainly sampled your fair share."

Gill looked at Orla with surprise, someone had obviously been talking. "Too many women, too little time."

"I hear you."

Gill suddenly felt like she was being eyed up as dinner, but it was an interesting turn of events and she was happy to play along. There was no doubting Orla Ryan's beauty, which meant it wouldn't be difficult for her to attract the ladies.

"I really like your shirt." Orla's finger trailed over Gill's collarbone, "I like the way you dress."

"You're not too shabby yourself."

Orla laughed as Gill clearly amused her. "I like to let my hair down a little on the weekends, it makes a pleasant change from the starched white shirts and fitted business suits, and the heels are a killer, but they make me more intimidating."

"What is it you do?"

"Oh, did Emma not say? I'm a criminal lawyer."

"You get the bad guys off."

"Sometimes, although some of them are actually innocent, surprisingly enough."

"But where is the fun in that?" Gill knew what criminal lawyers enjoyed most, she had known enough of them over the years through summer hockey.

Orla's eyes narrowed and she inclined her head. "Winning an impossible case is the ultimate high."

"You mean getting a guilty man to be declared innocent." It wasn't a question.

"They are the toughest cases to win."

"And he walks free to re-offend."

"That's not my concern. I practice the law to the best of my ability, and do my utmost for my

client."

"Commendable." Gill remarked, sarcastically.

"I think so."

Gill was beginning to wonder how Emma and Orla could ever have worked as a couple.

"You're a teacher?" Gill nodded at Orla's question. "I heard about your little scandal, that was a tough break."

"It was certainly unexpected. You don't think a night of passion as an eighteen-year old is going to come back to haunt you almost eight years later."

"So, you're twenty-six?"

"Yes, a few weeks ago."

"Still a baby."

Gill definitely didn't appreciate that comment, but she smiled politely and let it pass. "Well, it's getting late, I think I'm going to head back to the hotel."

"So soon? That's a pity, but perhaps you would like some company?"

"I'm going to pass, I have a busy day tomorrow."

Orla simply stared straight at Gillian with a small smile on her full lips, but Gill didn't cave in. "I'll see you at the game tomorrow."

"Looking forward to it."

Gill lay awake in her hotel room, going over her conversation with Orla. She simply couldn't get her head round Emma's attraction to the woman, beyond the physical. It didn't make sense, she just couldn't see them together, and yet they had been, for more than three years. Sleep was finally taking Gill when a knock at the door disturbed her. Opening the door, she found Emma standing on the other side wearing only a vest top and pyjama bottoms. "Is everything alright?"

"They're at it again and I really need to get some sleep." Emma sounded exasperated.

Gill stepped aside and invited her in. "You can bunk in with me."

"Oh, thank you." Emma headed straight for Gill's bed and got in with a big sigh.

Gill smiled and slipped under the sheets next to her, the pair easily sharing the large double bed.

"Night, Emma."

"Night, Gillian," came the mumbled reply.

Gill was more at ease now that Emma was next to her, and felt herself drifting off to sleep, but not before a noise came from the room next door.

"Oh no."

Gill tried not to laugh. "Sorry, Emma, but that's Hilary and Naimh."

"Who on earth is Naimh?"

"A woman we met tonight, she and Hilary have obviously hit it off."

Emma lay back on the pillow and pretended to cry. "I am never going to get any rest this weekend."

"Why are you all dressed up?" Emma took in Gill's smart black trousers, crisp white shirt with black buttons and teal v-neck jumper.

"We're going to meet nuns."

Emma held back a laugh, "They won't mind what you wear."

"I thought I should make the effort."

Emma smiled, "You look nice."

"Thank you."

They took the elevator down to reception. "What's your sister like?"

"Wait five minutes and you can find out for yourself."

They walked out of the hotel and across the road towards the cathedral. Gill saw some women standing outside selling flowers and Emma stopped to chat with them. They seemed to know each other. Gill watched as Emma hugged one of them. "Gillian, come and meet my sister."

Gill was puzzled as she stepped forward. "Julia meet Gillian. Gillian, this is Julia, now Sister Dolores."

Gill was momentarily speechless, but shook Sister Dolores' hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"And you, Gillian, I've heard so much about you. I was so sorry to hear of the passing of your friend, such a tragedy."

Gill felt a lump instantly form in her throat, "Thank you."

Sister Dolores hugged her and Gill wiped at the tears that leaked from her eyes. "I'm sorry, that was so unexpected."

"No need to apologise, Gillian, grieving is a natural process."

Gill nodded, "Yes."

"Come and meet the other sisters." Sister Dolores led Gill by the hand over to where the women were standing selling flowers. "Sisters, this is Gillian, a friend of Emma's over from Scotland for the weekend. Can you keep her company while I catch up with Emma?"

"Of course, come on and tell us all about yourself, Gillian."

Gill smiled at the kind faces. The women of various ages were all dressed in sensible clothing, the only thing indicating their true identity was the large cross each of them wore around their necks. "I hope I'm not speaking out of turn, ladies, but I was expecting you to be wearing habits."

The women laughed, "Oh, that was so last century, Gillian, we are moving with the times. Sister Mary Louise has an iPod and Sister Dolores has a mobile phone."

"Well you ladies are all very well turned out."

"Oh, such a charmer you are, Gillian."

Gill was in love with these women, they were sweet and charming, and the accents, she was in heaven. They lifted her spirits as she laughed along with them, telling stories about school and hockey.

Emma and Sister Dolores glanced over to the group as yet more peels of laughter rang out from under the archway.

"She has them eating out of the palm of her hand." Sister Dolores remarked.

"Gillian has a lot of charm."

"You like her." It wasn't a question.

"We're friends, good friends."

"But you have feelings for her, I can tell from your letters."

Emma sighed, "Gillian likes to play the field in more ways than one."

"I see." Sister Dolores glanced back over at Gillian, watching her conversing with her sisters.

"Tell me what you will be doing in the coming months?"

Sister Dolores smiled, turning her attention back to Emma, "I'm going to Uganda in July."

"You see more of the world than anyone I know, Julia," Emma remarked. Her sister's original name rolling easily off her tongue, as it always did when they were alone.

"I love my work. This time I will work in an orphanage, teaching English and God's word."

"Please be careful, you hear such stories of horror."

"Have faith, Emma." A calm steady gaze accompanied the words.

Emma and Julia returned to the main group who were still swapping stories amid lots of laughter. "Gillian, will you walk with me a little?"

Gill was surprised by the request from Sister Dolores, but readily agreed. Dolores linked arms with her and they strolled a little down the walkway. "This is very cosy," Gill remarked, her words hiding a rare moment of loss of control. A feeling almost anathema to Gill around another woman.

Sister Dolores patted Gill's hand, "Will you look after Emma for me? Keep her away from Orla Ryan, that woman is no good for her."

Gill nodded, "I'll do my best." She totally agreed with Sister Dolores after meeting Orla in the pub last night.

"Thank you. Emma tells me you have an eye for the ladies."

"Ah, I suppose so, speaking of which, Sister Marie Louise is very cute."

Sister Dolores stopped walking and turned to look at Gillian before glancing towards Sister Marie Louise. "You're very observant."

"Her eyes follow you everywhere."

Sister Dolores nodded once, slowly, "As do yours with Emma."

"She's very pretty and smart, just like her sister."

"Emma said you were very charming." Sister Dolores added, looking coy and Gill simply smiled her quirky grin. "We should be getting back, but I hope to see you again sometime, Gillian."

"I look forward to it."

They said their goodbyes and Gill and Emma headed back to the hotel to get ready for their first match of the day. "Are you telling me they are all celibate?"

Emma wouldn't make eye contact with Gillian. "They have all taken vows of celibacy."

"Ahh, that's not the same thing."

"Gillian, they are nuns, behave."

"Trust me, I know when I'm being eyed up and a couple of those nuns were definitely giving me the eye."

"You're imagining things."

"Uhuh, what about your sister?"

"Don't even go there, Gillian," Emma warned.

"Sister Mary Louise? They make a cute couple."

Emma ignored Gillian all the way back to the hotel room.

The team were a little early for the start of the game and stood around waiting for everyone else to turn up. Hilary rolled a ball towards Gillian. "Come on, Rae, show us your fancy skills."

Gill smiled, "What about some keepy uppy?"

"Oh, like we do some fancy stick work and everyone votes the winner?"

"Yeah, you up for it?"

"Can the ball bounce on the ground?"

"So long as it's under control and part of the skill, yup."

Hilary nodded, "Let's get it on."

Gill easily used the edge of her stick to flick the ball, one handed, into the air. She bounced the ball on the flat face of her stick before adding her second hand to the stick. She then bounced the ball on the very top of the stick handle before casually passing the ball to Hilary. "Come on, two gloves, do your best."

The rest of the team stood on the side, encouraging their teammates to outdo each other. Hilary finally threw in the towel when Gill really turned it on. She knew there was no one better at performing tricks with a hockey stick than Gillian. The other teams had started to arrive and wandered over to see what was going on and they were treated to an audacious display from Gillian. The ball never touched the ground for several minutes as Gill used every part of her stick and body to keep it in mid air. Gill finally ending the fun by smacking the ball, in mid air, from the halfway line towards one of the goals, which it missed by inches. Not one move she had performed would be legal on a hockey pitch, but it was fun to do.

The game eventually got underway and Dunedin romped to yet another victory. The talk amongst the Dunedin players was that Gillian was better than ever and the goals were flying in from all angles. She seemed to have gained a whole new focus and discipline towards the game in the last few weeks.

With one game remaining, a win or draw would see Dunedin win the tournament, it was against Orla Ryan's team, who knew a win for them would seal the tournament in their favour. Dunedin was up against Dublin Ladies as well as a very partisan crowd, for the final match of the weekend.

"Okay, who is still fit? We need to get eleven players on the park, so whoever thinks they can last hands up?" Only seven hands went up, including Gillian and Emma's. "You seven are starting," Sheila declared. "The rest of us will rotate amongst ourselves to keep eleven players on the pitch. Gill, you organise all the corners since you are involved in every one. Let's go out with a victory and a hundred percent record."

The seven healthy players and four walking wounded took to the pitch to face the opposition. It wasn't the most dynamic game ever, the pace was a little slower as there were no fresh legs left after six full matches. With the game littered with mistakes due to fatigue, Gill simply capitalised on the errors and got a hat trick. It was enough to see Dunedin win 3-2 and take the title. With the hockey over, it was time to hit the showers and get ready for the presentation dinner that evening.

Walking from the pitch and shaking hands with the opposition, Gillian was startled to find herself being asked for her autograph by some of the junior members of the Dublin hockey club. It was a novel experience to say the least and the cause of much teasing for Gill for the remainder of the weekend.

The meal was pleasant and, after the food was finished, the after dinner presentations began.

Sheila picked up the tournament trophy and Gill picked up the award for the top goal scorer. Both announcements were greeted with generous applause. With the tournament officially closed, all that was left was a night of fun. With no games in the morning, Gill danced a little and drank a little, then watched as Naimh De Rossa arrived shortly before midnight.

"Oh, Hilary, two nights of passion in a row?" she teased her friend.

"We seem to have hit it off, so we made arrangements for a repeat performance."

Naimh arrived at the table. "Hello, Gillian, good to see you again."

"You too, Naimh."

Hilary stood up, "Well, I'll see you all tomorrow morning."

"Night you two." Gill watched them go, the room starting to empty a little as people either went to bed for rest, or paired off. She looked across the dance floor and saw Emma chatting with Orla Ryan. She considered her options. She could leave them to it and head up to bed, or she could do what she'd rather do and interrupt which had the added advantage of fulfilling the promise she'd made that morning to Emma's sister. Gill chose the latter.

"Would you like to dance?" Orla didn't look happy too be interrupted, but Gill apologised and smiled. Emma agreed and they took to the dance floor, a slow track was playing and Gill began to lead Emma effortlessly around the floor.

"Is this a waltz?"

"Kind of, I've modified it a little."

"I know you can dance, but I didn't realise you knew *how* to dance."

"It's part of the school curriculum. We have to keep things current to keep the kids interested in exercise and, right now, dance is the thing. All kinds of dance from contemporary to this."

"Who teaches you?"

Gill smiled, "We bring specialists into the school, often on Friday afternoons, when the students have gone. They teach the teachers."

They were silent for a few moments, as Gill led them around the floor. Then she asked the question she had been desperate to ask for so long. "Do you still love her?"

Emma shook her head, "I love what we had together, but she broke my heart. I could never trust her again. She slept with my best friend, I lost them both because of that."

"She wants you back?"

"Yes."

"She wants you to move back to Dublin?"

Emma nodded.

Gill looked into her eyes, "If she wanted you, she should have come after you. That's what I would have done." And with that, Gill leaned in and gently kissed Emma on the lips, then the music ended and she walked away.

Slightly dazed, Emma watched her go, then turned back to Orla who had been looking on with interest. "Looks like I'm too late."

"It wouldn't have mattered if it was now or a few months ago, we can't turn back the clock."

Orla nodded, "You're moving on and she is a lucky woman."

Emma looked back over at Gillian, who smiled softly. She wished it were true.

Gill took the lift up to her room, she was tired and finally feeling the effects of the long weekend. She wondered what would happen between Emma and Orla. Despite Emma's words, Gill knew that it must be difficult for Emma having to see Orla again this weekend. Gill stood outside the door to her room and yawned, she had been woolgathering. Removing the keycard from her bag she put it into the slot.

"I wonder which room will be quieter tonight?"

Gill turned to see Emma standing behind her. She gave the question some consideration, "That's a tough one, Karen should be worn out by now, but you never know. On the other hand, Hilary and Naimh, are definitely going to be busy." Gill smiled, "We could flip a coin?"

She watched Emma walk towards her and knew instantly that something was different. The kiss, when it came, was gentle. There was no haste, just a slow meeting of mouths. Gill deepened the kiss and, much to her delight, Emma went with it. They stood kissing in the corridor outside Gill's room for several minutes until, when they stopped, Gill searched Emma's face, a question on her lips. "Would you like to come in?"

Emma swallowed and nodded. Gill, normally well co-ordinated, fumbled slightly with the card lock, but soon had the door open.

Once inside the door Gill flicked the lamp switch, illuminating the room with a soft glow. Emma sat on the edge of the bed, knees together, her back ramrod straight. Gill walked towards her and bending slowly, captured her lips and continued to lean forward until Emma was lying back on the bed, Gill's arms splayed either side of her, holding her weight off Emma. The Irishwoman

began to unbutton Gill's shirt until it fell open, displaying her firm breasts, which were held in place by a black lace bra. Gill trembled as Emma ran her fingertips over her taut abdomen, before unbuttoning her trousers and pushing them over her buttocks. Gill moved onto the bed, kicking off her shoes and slipping her trousers from her legs as she went. Emma turned to face Gill, searching for her lips and allowing Gill to slowly unzip the back of her dress, all the way down to the base of her spine. Gill's fingers itched to touch Emma everywhere.

"I've been wanting to do this for so long," Gill confessed, as she slipped Emma's dress from her shoulders, then assisted Emma to remove it fully, before slipping her own shirt off. "So beautiful." Gill took a moment to look at Emma as she sat in her underwear, before reaching behind and unclasping her bra. Emma's full breasts were revealed as Gillian removed the garment. Gill sucked one of Emma's nipples into her mouth, swirling her tongue around the erect tissue, while Emma removed Gill's bra. Gill continued to use her tongue on Emma's nipples as she sat up and pulled Emma into her lap. The blonde now straddling Gill and pulling her closer to her breasts, her fingers running through Gill's silky brown locks, as Gill's hands grasped Emma's buttocks, pulling her nearer to Gill, who pushed her hips forward and continued to grind her pelvis against the blonde's centre. Emma got to her knees encouraging Gill to do the same and they removed the last vestiges of material between them. Kneading Gill's breasts firmly, Emma kissed her hard before pushing Gill back onto the bed. She kissed and licked Gill's neck before moving down to take one of Gill's breasts into her mouth, sucking the nipple hard between her tongue and the roof of her mouth, encouraged by Gill's hand pressing her mouth harder against her breast. Emma trailed kisses down Gill's abdomen before nudging her thighs apart and licking the insides of them. Gill's stomach quivered with anticipation as she watched Emma move her head between her thighs and bury her tongue into Gill's centre. Gill sighed and watched with rapt fascination as Emma's head bobbed up and down as she thrust her tongue in and out of Gill. Emma then laved Gill's clit with her tongue, swirling it over the erect tissue until Gill's legs started to tremble.

Gill tried desperately not to come too soon, but the thought of Emma's lips pleasuring her was her undoing. Emma didn't stop and Gill came a second time before she had nothing more to offer. Emma made her way back up Gill's sweat soaked body and kissed her lazily, offering her a taste of her own fruits. Moments later Gill pushed Emma onto her back and swiftly entered her with two fingers. Emma cried out in pleasure, as Gill thrust into her again and again, before her mouth joined her fingers and Emma went over the edge with Gillian's name on her lips. They held each other close, kissing and touching until their desire reignited. Their bodies meshed so tightly together it was hard to tell where one started and the other ended as they stroked each other to orgasm, Gill arriving mere seconds before Emma. The night of passion continued, sometimes desperate, sometimes gentle, with cries of pleasure and tears of release, both women exercising their demons as they bonded. Gill had never felt so connected to another human being. Emma's self-controlled, reserved nature shattered, to be replaced with reckless abandon as she let herself go, surrendering and taking in equal measure. Finally spent, the pair fell asleep in each other's arms.

Emma woke before Gill and enjoyed the simple pleasure of watching her unguarded. The faint laughter lines on her face, the healing scars around her left eye, she memorised them. When Gill

awoke an hour later, Emma was gone.

Gill packed and then made her way down for breakfast. It was the quietest everyone had been that weekend, a combination of fatigue and some hangovers. She caught sight of Hilary saying goodbye to Naimh and briefly wondered what would happen between the two women. She kept looking for Emma, but the OT didn't make an appearance until it was time to leave for the airport. Gillian caught her eye and smiled, but Emma looked sad and Gill wondered what could possibly be wrong after the night they had just shared together.

After checking in at the airport, the general mood of the team picked up a little and the jokes about the weekend started to fly. The inevitable one being who did and didn't get laid, there was a lot of speculation about that, which then turned to Gillian.

"Gill, have you just gone on tour and not gotten laid? That must be a first," Laura remarked.

There were murmurs of disbelief and Gill didn't rise to the bait, she simply shrugged. Hilary looked at Gillian, she had clearly heard Gillian the night before, and was about to say just that, but Gill gave her a warning look, which in turn had Hilary sending a questioning look Gill's way.

Back at Edinburgh airport the team walked through to baggage collection and there was time for one final bit of hilarity. "Quick form a circle around Gillian, we have to protect her from crazed fans and autograph hunters."

Laura's joke raised the final laugh of the weekend and brought it to a close. The team began to go their separate ways and Gill and Emma found themselves sharing a quiet, strained return journey on the 35 bus. Every time she looked Emma's way the Irishwoman was staring out the window, offering nothing more than pleasantries. Gillian was wishing the journey to be over, desperate to be home and out of this atmosphere. She couldn't understand what had gone so dreadfully wrong since the best night of her life. When the bus finally got to Emma's stop the pair said their goodbyes, and Gill stayed on for one more stop. She felt absolutely rotten.

Chapter 28

Gillian drove out to Pauline and Brian's house with the intention of both visiting Charlotte and collecting Paws. She had missed the little dog, especially since she had arrived home yesterday from Dublin. The pup would have raised her spirits, helping to take the edge off the misery she had been feeling since Sunday morning. Emma hadn't been in touch and Gill had made the decision not to go to their pre-arranged lunch date. She got the feeling Emma didn't want to see

her right now, especially not at work.

Gill was delighted to see Charlotte on her feet and walking around with less pain and more movement, she was really doing great, just as Hilary promised. Paws was ever present by her side, it was almost like the pup sensed Charlotte was healing. The pair were made for each other.

"I brought you a little something back from my trip."

Charlotte smiled and waited patiently for her gift, her eyes instantly lighting up at the first sight of her new doll in traditional Irish dress. Charlotte easily located the little button on the doll's wrist, knowing exactly what would happen when she pressed it and she wasn't disappointed when the doll burst into a rendition of 'When Irish Eyes Are Smiling'. Gill looked to Pauline, who was clearly bemused, and shrugged, "Sorry, but I know she loves these singing dolls and they seem to sell them at the airports, I couldn't resist."

Pauline watched on as Charlotte pressed the button again and giggled as the doll moved her head and sang. Pauline would have given anything to hear Charlotte laugh again just a few weeks ago and now Gillian had provided another source, Pauline was grateful. "Gill, can I have a word?"

Gill nodded and knew they were heading for the kitchen.

"It's about Paws."

"No problem, Pauline, I'm here to collect him, there was never any pressure on you to keep him, it's fine."

"Gill, I wanted to ask if you would leave him here with Charlotte?"

"Oh, I see."

"These last few days, with Paws around, I've seen a change in her, he is definitely helping her mood and now that she has a bit more mobility, the dog is almost doing the work for us of encouraging her to come on short walks. We'd love to keep him, Gill, and I think it would break Charlotte's heart to have to part with him now."

Gill smiled, despite her pang of loss, "That was always the hope, Pauline, I'm delighted it's worked out. I'll drop off all his toys and bring in his travelcot."

Pauline hugged Gillian and kissed her cheek, "The dog was a fantastic idea."

"I'll go talk to Charlotte."

Gill looked at the little girl as she played with her puppy. "Charlotte, you know I'm very busy with hockey and school and I'm not home very much?" Charlotte nodded, looking intently at Gillian. "Well I feel that I'm not able to look after Paws properly and I wonder if you could help

me?"

"Okay, Gilly."

"Could I leave Paws here with you, and you look after him?"

The little girl's eyes went wide as she nodded enthusiastically. "I will look after him the best, Gilly!"

Gill rubbed Charlotte's mop of red curls, "I know you will."

Gill said her goodbyes to Paws, he wasn't her dog any longer, and promised to be back the following day with all his toys and goodies. It was with a heavy heart that she left Pauline's home and decided to head straight to training, a run might improve her mood.

Gill jogged around the perimeter of the large playing fields. It was a pleasant spring evening and all she could think about was Emma and why the woman wouldn't talk to her. In fact, she could barely look at Gill and Gill could not work out how a fantastic night had turned into such a disaster. After her first lap, Gill was joined by Sarah Mathieson. She rarely got a chance to talk alone with the tall brooding policewoman who was usually all work and no play.

"How are things, Gillian?"

Gill knew this was Sarah's way of asking after her following the death of Justine. Sarah had been the one to break the news to her, that also meant Sarah was working the case. "I'm doing okay, thanks. You putting in some extra training?"

"I often do, keeps me fit for the job and the hockey. We have a gym back at the station, but it's not so easy to go for a run. This is ideal."

These two women were fit, easily holding a conversation as they completed another lap, Gill's second of the evening. "Sarah, you will be in court when Justine's case is heard?"

"That's right, Gill, I was first on the scene."

"Tell me about him? What's his name? Where does he live?"

Sarah put her arm on Gill's shoulder and effectively stopped them both jogging. She shook her head, "You don't want to do this, Gillian."

"But I can't stop thinking about how he feels, what is he like, does he even care?" The frustration in her voice was evident.

Sarah debated answering Gillian. She pursed her lips as she contemplated what, if anything, she could tell Gill. "He's twenty-one, he was driving his works van in difficult road conditions."

"Was he speeding?" Gill needed to know.

Sarah shook her head, "Technically no, he hit black ice and lost control. A combination of inexperience and youth."

Gill took a shaky breath and closed her eyes. "I want to go to court when the case is heard."

"Gill, you don't want to put yourself through that," Sarah cautioned.

Gill looked meaningfully at her teammate, "I *need* to go. Please, will you tell me when it is?"

Sarah nodded, "I'll tell you, Gillian."

Gill swallowed hard, "Thank you." Gill was about to jog away when Sarah stopped her.

"Wait."

Gill turned to look at the policewoman, suddenly dreading what she might say, but needing to hear it.

"There was one eye witness report that will interest you."

"Go on." Gill encouraged.

"A man who was walking towards Justine and Charlotte said that Justine's final act was to pull Charlotte into her arms and cradle her from the full impact."

"She saved Charlotte's life?"

"Most probably."

Gill nodded as tears glistened in her eyes. Sarah simply put an arm around her shoulder and walked them both back towards the clubhouse.

Training got underway a short time later and though the season was almost over, there was still a lot for Dunedin to play for. Sheila gave a talk as the first team gathered around. "Remember, ladies, we are one game away from being at cup final Saturday. We need an extra big effort this coming game, it will be a tough match, but we *can* win it." Dunedin were drawn to play the team they were level on points with in the semi-final. A win would almost certainly assure them of a place in European competition for the first time in their history, as it was most likely the other semi-final would be won by the team currently top of the league. That meant that they were already going to be in Europe next year. The stakes were high and increased the tension amongst

the Dunedin players as they ventured into new territory. They had to hold their nerve and not freeze on Saturday. "We are joint second in the league, but with only one game left, top spot is out of our reach, but we can come second. Ladies, this has been a monumental season of firsts for our hockey club, now let's focus and get to the finishing line. We want a trophy." Sheila really could be inspiring when she put her mind to it, she had practically rendered Scott redundant this season, in truth, the club was moving beyond his abilities as a coach.

"Hear, hear."

Training was upbeat, especially after Sheila's team talk, but Gillian's hopes of a talk with Emma were dashed when immediately after training Emma left to cycle home. Gill watched her go, wondering how she was going to be able to fix whatever was wrong. Suddenly she felt a strong hand grip her arm and found herself being led to a quiet corner of the pitch.

"It was Emma," Hilary accused.

Gill stared at Hilary.

"In Dublin, the person in your room on Sunday night was Emma."

Gill nodded, "I don't want to talk about it."

"What the hell did you go and do, Gillian? You were friends, everything was going well, now she won't even look at you."

"I know, and I wish I could work out why."

"Isn't it obvious? You slept with her, you've done the deed and now you have discarded her like yesterday's news."

"I haven't!"

"Then what's going on?"

"I want to be with her!"

Hilary looked at Gillian, seeing the truth in her declaration.

"I spent the best night of my life with Emma and now she won't talk to me. Did you ever stop to think that this isn't my fault? I don't know what to do, because she won't talk to me."

"Oh."

"I feel like she used me, Hilary."

"I'm not going to laugh, but coming from you, that statement is hilarious."

"I know, but she spent all weekend being chased by her ex girlfriend and then she slept with me. She knew I wouldn't refuse and I think that's all she wanted."

"You need to speak to her, even if it's just to find out that she doesn't want anything else. At least that way, you will know where you stand with her."

"I can't believe that she would walk away, Hilary, it was...amazing."

Hilary hugged Gill, she realised that for all Gill's experience with women, she was emotionally inexperienced, not used to exposing her feelings, as she simply hadn't found anyone to invest them in until now. "Welcome to the real world, Gillian, they don't always love you back."

"You shit," Gill mumbled.

"I know."

Gill drove home and contemplated going to Emma's flat, but her heart just wasn't in it. Her next thought was Justine's, that's what she would always do in a situation like this, but her friend was gone. Gill sat in her car, parked outside her flat and realised at that point in time there was no one she could turn to, not anyone close enough. Emma had become that, but Emma was the source of her current dilemma. Gill felt like everything was coming apart at the seams, and realised Emma had played a big part in preventing that happening until now. With Emma currently out of the picture, Gill was feeling like she was sinking without an arm to grasp on to.

Chapter 29

Maggie McLure caught sight of Gillian as she walked towards the PE block. The young woman didn't seem herself and Dennis Carter, the head of the PE department, had spoken to Maggie about her. Suddenly there was a shout of 'Dyke!' and two fourth year boys came hurtling around the corner towards her.

"You two!" They stopped dead in their tracks, "Go and sit outside my office and wait for me. Now!" The boys scurried off, shame faced.

Maggie watched as Gill entered the PE block, she hadn't even turned around when the boys had shouted. Entering the building, she saw Gill in the staff room through the glass window, making a cup of tea. She knocked on the door.

Gill waved, "Hi, Maggie, come in. You want some tea?"

"Sure, milk no sugar."

"I remember."

"You not teaching?"

"I have a rare free period."

Maggie took a seat in the staff room and eyed Gill cautiously. "Gillian, didn't you hear those fourth year boys just a minute ago?"

Gill looked up from her task, "Oh, the dyke remark? I tend to just ignore it."

"So it happens often?"

Gill shrugged, "Often enough, I expected it after the newspaper article, it's no big deal. I hardly even notice it now."

"So I see. Listen, Gillian, I want you to tell me when this is happening."

Gill shook her head, "Maggie, I don't want to make a big thing out of it. If we do, I think it will get worse, as it is, it's tapering off." She handed Maggie her cup of tea and they took a seat.

"Well, I'm suspending those two regardless. I caught them in the act, I can't let it go."

"Fair enough."

Maggie looked at Gill, she was definitely down in the dumps. "What's wrong, Gillian? You don't seem like yourself."

Gill sighed, "I miss Justine, lots. I also miss Paws."

"Well I understand you missing Justine, but who on earth is Paws?"

Gill managed a small smile. "A little puppy I got for Charlotte. An adorable chocolate Lab. I had him for a few weeks, looked after him and took him to visit Charlotte almost everyday. I left him with Charlotte for the Easter weekend and when I went to pick him up Pauline begged me not to, as he had transformed Charlotte, so I left him there and now I'm lonely as hell."

"Get another one," Maggie suggested.

"Maybe." Gill's vague reply indicating her reluctance.

"How was Dublin?"

"It was...great."

"It doesn't sound great." Maggie's voice conveyed her concern.

"It was great up until I slept with Emma."

"Oh, Gillian, for goodness sake."

Gill shook her head, "It's not what you think. I've fallen hard for her, Maggie and since we slept together, which was no one sided thing, she has been avoiding me. Before that we were practically inseparable. I miss her. She hasn't called me, or popped down to visit. At training we hardly speak to each other. She is making her own way to hockey games when I usually give her a lift. I don't know what is going on."

Maggie listened with a sympathetic ear, "Have you called her?"

"No."

"Visited her?"

"No."

"Offered her a lift, tried to speak to her at training?"

"Okay, I see where this is going."

"Gillian, if you really want this woman, and I think that you do, you need to put yourself out there. Visit her, take her flowers, *talk* to her. Whatever it takes, you have to give it a try."

"I don't know, Maggie, she was hurt before, I think she is afraid to take a chance on me."

"Well, I can't say I blame her, but you need to convince her otherwise." Maggie made sure Gill was hearing her, "But if you mess her around, I will kick your arse, hard."

Gill laughed for the first time in days. "I believe you would."

"Call her, Gillian and talk to her."

Maggie finished her tea and left to go and deal with the fourth year boys waiting outside her office, leaving Gillian sitting alone in the staff room, contemplating the advice Maggie had given her. She hoped she was right in thinking Emma was avoiding her because Gillian wasn't someone she was prepared to take a chance on and, when it got right down to it, who could blame Emma for feeling that way. There was still the option that Emma really had simply used Gillian for a night of passion and ordinarily Gill would have no problem with that, except this time, Gill wanted more. A situation she had never found herself in after sleeping with a woman.

Gill thought back to Saturday, a busy day at Peffermill, where all the semi-finals had taken place. There had been many opportunities for them to talk to each other, but neither of them had taken the first step. The team had been buoyant after winning their closely contested match, a game that, had Gillian and Emma been fully focussed on, they might well have won a little more comfortably.

Gill reached up to a shelf on the back wall and removed a copy of the yellow pages. Searching the listings she found a flower shop that promised delivery that same day. She called and ordered a spring bouquet with the simple message. *'Can we talk?'* G xx She hoped it would be enough to set the wheels in motion.

Hilary Duffy strode along the hospital corridor towards the nurses' station of the orthopaedic ward, her prey firmly in her sights. Murray, the staff nurse had pissed her off once too often and she was ready to give him hell. Her momentum was interrupted by a beautiful spray of brightly coloured flowers in the arms of Emma Hughes. "Are those from a patient?"

Emma turned to see Hilary standing there, and her cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink. Not immediately finding her voice, Hilary plucked the card from the bouquet and read it.

"Impressive, I didn't think she had it in her." Hilary handed the card back to Emma, "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

Hilary looked around, making sure that no one could overhear their conversation. "Gillian thinks that you used her."

Emma looked horrified, "I would never do that."

"Then you have to explain to her what's going on. She's a smart and talented young woman, but when it comes to affairs of the heart, she is a complete novice. She feels terrible, but you don't look much better yourself."

"It was my fault, I initiated the whole thing. Gillian never pushed."

"She never does."

They both shared a smile at the truth of that statement. "She's still grieving, I should never have taken advantage."

"I'm not the one you need to be talking to."

"I know." She knew it was Gillian who needed to hear those words.

"I hate to see the two of you like this. Gill wants to chat, I think you should take her up on that offer. You're both miserable."

"I'll text her."

"Good." Hilary's attention was returned to her reason for being at the nurses' station, "Murray? Murray! Wait up."

Emma watched as the staff nurse scurried down the corridor with Hilary Duffy striding after him. Her day finished, she returned to the OT department and removed her mobile phone from her locker. She sent a short text to Gillian. *7 p.m tonight at mine?* The reply arrived less than a minute later. *See you then xx*

Gill was delighted to receive a text from Emma, at least it meant they would talk. It was a start. She continued her attempt at making dinner, which admittedly wasn't going well, but how difficult could it be to boil pasta and add a ready made sauce from a tub? Her nutrition sheet had said pasta was a good idea several times a week, but at this rate, she would be walking up to her local Italian restaurant to get it. She really needed to learn to cook.

Two hours later, with a belly that still felt full, Gill suspected this was due to the pasta being undercooked, it had been very chewy, Gill took the short walk up to Emma's flat.

Pressing the buzzer, Gill waited to be let in. Walking up the stairs, Emma was, as usual, waiting at her open door.

"Hi."

"Come on in, have you eaten?"

"I had some pasta disaster." Emma looked quizzically at Gill. "Long story, I can't cook."

"Thank you for the flowers by the way, they are lovely."

Gill looked around, but didn't see her flowers anywhere.

"Unfortunately, I couldn't cycle home with them, so they are being admired in the OT department."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that." Gill smiled and shrugged and the act instantly reminded Emma as to why she was so drawn to this woman.

"Have a seat." Why did everything suddenly feel so formal? Their easy familiarity had been removed with one night of passion, replaced by a clumsy awkwardness that was alien to both of them. Emma falling back on politeness and manners and Gill looking like a teenager waiting outside the headmaster's office.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

"What about some music?"

Gill frowned, "Emma, can we just talk?"

"Of course, yes."

"I'm sorry." They both apologised at the same time, another clumsy moment.

"Why are you sorry, Gillian?"

"Well, obviously we shouldn't have slept together, so I'm sorry for that."

"I'm the one who is sorry. I shouldn't have taken advantage of you like that."

Gill was surprised, she had hoped that Emma hadn't used her, but it seemed her worst fears were confirmed.

"You are grieving and I had no right to give in to my desires. I should have shown more restraint."

Gill was crestfallen. "I see." Gill had no words, and Emma was suddenly alarmed that the situation was worse, not better.

"I don't think this is helping."

"Seems not."

"I'm sorry, Gill, I'm finding it hard to just pick up where we left off as friends. I promised myself I would never sleep with you, but I gave in to the temptation. I should have been stronger. I know it's easy for you to pick back up with people, but I can't."

"Then why *did* you sleep with me?"

Emma shook her head, "I was home, around my ex girlfriend, I was lonely and you were there. I thought I could be like you for once."

"You used me," Gill accused.

"No one has ever used you, Gillian. You have always gotten what you wanted. You have made it clear on several occasions that you wanted to sleep with me. We both got what we wanted."

"Not this time. Maybe you did, but I certainly didn't."

Emma was confused, "What do you mean?"

"I didn't get you, I didn't want a one time thing."

"Gillian, you're grieving. You don't know what you want right now."

"Yes, I am grieving and I don't know how long it will last, but I'm not confused and my feelings aren't mixed up because of it. I fell for you before I lost Justine. She knew it before I did and if she was here she would tell you the exact same thing."

Emma shook her head, "I've been hurt in the past, I can't go through that again."

Gillian moved closer to Emma, taking her hand. "I know you have been hurt, but I won't hurt you."

Emma looked sadly at Gillian, "You don't know that, you sleep around and you can't commit."

Gill was frustrated, wondering how she could convey her depth of feeling to Emma. "But now I've found someone I want to be with. As for sleeping around, I promise you I won't. I can be faithful."

Emma frowned, she looked torn and Gillian knew she had to convince her. "Tell me you don't want to be with me. Tell me you don't want to see where this can go and I will walk away. I'm asking you to take a leap of faith and I understand that you are scared, but I *know* we can make it work."

"How can you know, Gillian? How can you be sure? You have never had a proper relationship."

Gillian decided it was time she told Emma the whole truth. "Because for years I was in love with Justine. Right up until our third year in college. It took me that long to realise she would never be able to return my feelings. Until then, I kept hoping she would somehow see the light, but it wasn't to be, Justine was born straight." Gill smiled at that, "I haven't had a girlfriend in all these years because I *know* what it feels like to find that special someone. A person who can make you light up when they walk into a room. A person whose smile can transform your day. I feel all that again when I'm with you."

Emma sat on her sofa staring at Gillian. She had been rendered speechless.

"Say something, please" Gill felt raw and exposed.

"I, ah. Sunday night was amazing, Gillian and it scared me. *You* scare me."

Gill decided to risk all and leaned in to kiss Emma. "Please don't push me away," she whispered. Emma didn't, she welcomed the contact. The pair quickly became lost in each other, picking up where they left off in Dublin, but it was Gillian who called a halt to proceedings. Smiling at Emma, she tucked a loose strand of blonde hair behind the Irishwoman's ear. "I'll see you at training tomorrow and perhaps we could go out for a bite to eat on Wednesday evening?"

Emma appreciated Gill's ability to refrain from jumping back into bed with her, though on a more basic level, she knew she would have been hard pressed to say no. "Dinner would be great. I'll see you tomorrow." Emma walked Gillian to the front door where they shared another lingering kiss.

"I'll see you tomorrow, goodnight, Emma."

Chapter 30

Gillian watched as the last of the pupils left the PE block at break-time. She glanced at her watch and decided she had time for a quick drink and a bite to eat and that the best place to get both quickly was the main staffroom. Walking through the school grounds, Gill took her phone out of her tracksuit pocket, checking just in case she had a message from Emma, she smiled at the thought.

"Is that your girlfriend calling you, Miss?"

Gill smiled at the young boy and kept walking. It wasn't as though he was wrong. As her phone sprang to life, it went into overdrive, there were several messages stopping Gill in her tracks and for one moment the blood in her veins turned to ice. Something had happened. Holding her breath, she opened the first message, but a call was coming through at the same time, overriding the process. Gill hit the answer button.

"Hello?"

"Gill, it's Laura."

"Oh, hi, is everything okay?"

"I'm guessing you haven't checked the Scottish hockey website this morning."

"Why would I?"

"Eh, because you have been named in the latest squad."

"For what?"

"The upcoming friendly against France."

Gill was trying to get her head around what Laura was telling her. "Are you saying I've been called up for Scotland?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying, we're going to be teammates, Karen and Camilla are in the squad too."

Gillian was silent and Laura thought she had been disconnected. *"Gill, you there?"*

"What? Yes, sorry, I'm just well, stunned, I never thought it would happen." Gillian was suddenly suspicious, "Laura if this is a wind-up I swear..."

Gill could hear Laura groan on the other end of the line, *"Go find a computer and take a look, oh and by the way...Congratulations, Gill, it's a about time."*

Gillian stood in the school grounds, her hand covering her mouth and a bewildered look upon her face.

"Miss, are you okay?"

Gill blinked to see Carla Tonner standing in front of her, a concerned look on her face. "What? Yes, I'm fine, Carla, thanks."

"Have you just got bad news, Miss?"

Gill shook her head and smiled, "Actually, it's good news. I've been called up to play for Scotland."

"Not being funny, Miss, but it's about bloody time them prudes got their fingers out."

Gill looked at Carla, a reprimand on her lips, but instead she burst out laughing, "I couldn't have put it better myself."

"Congratulations, Miss, I'm going to come and watch."

Gill nodded, "Thanks, Carla, I'll see you at the game tomorrow morning." Gill changed direction and jogged to the IT department in search of a computer. She burst through the doors like a bat out of hell.

"Where's the fire?"

"Sorry, Mark, but I need to check something on the Internet straight away."

Mark Johnson invited Gill over to the computer he was sitting at, "Anything I can help with?"

"Can you get me the website for Scottish hockey?"

Mark nodded and put in a search, quickly bringing up the homepage. "Click on National Teams," Gill instructed.

Mark did as requested and watched as another menu appeared. Gill looked at it, "Select seniors." There under latest news was the senior women's squad for the upcoming friendly against France. Gill ran her finger down the list until she came to her name. *Rae, Gillian. Dunedin Ladies.*

"That's you, Gill," Mark declared with surprise in his voice.

Gill smiled as she looked at the technician, "I've finally been selected for Scotland."

"Congratulations."

"Thanks, Mark."

Walking back to the PE department to take her final class of the day, Gill had a smile on her face and her snack was forgotten as she started to welcome the students into the PE block. The lesson flew by and Gill was soon heading off in search of lunch before making her way to staff in-service.

"I hear congratulations are in order, Gillian."

"Hi, Maggie, who told you?"

"I checked the website."

"Yeah?"

Maggie smiled, "While you might not bother, Dennis and I always do with each new squad that's named. We knew this day would come."

Gill nodded, "I won't believe it's really happening until I'm running around on the pitch."

"Well, I can't blame you for being sceptical, but you have been named in the squad, it's a start."

"I know, but after everything that's happened, I don't want to get carried away."

"No harm in keeping your feet on the ground, Gillian. You keep your head down and behave yourself, the rest will take care of itself."

"I have every intention of doing just that." Maggie gave Gill a look she couldn't decipher.
"What? What's that look for?"

Smiling, the older woman shook her head, "I believe you have finally grown up."

"Cheek."

"You know what I mean, I think you're finally ready to realise your full potential. Make the most of it, Gillian, this opportunity is only going to present itself once."

Gill nodded contemplatively, "I know."

"Don't mess it up."

"Stop being so serious, you're scaring me."

"There is no shame in being nervous."

"I'm not nervous," Gill protested.

"Of course you're not." Maggie simply looked at Gillian.

"Okay, I'm a little nervous, but don't you dare tell a soul."

"Excited too?"

Gill shook her head, "I'm too dubious, I won't allow myself to be excited, Maggie. I could be called up for countless squads, but never actually be capped. Like I say, until I'm running around that pitch in a Scotland strip, I'm remaining sceptical."

"I'll be there to watch you when it happens."

"Thanks, Maggie."

Gillian took the stairs two at a time, such was her haste to see Emma. As usual, the Irishwoman was waiting at her front door. "Hi." Gill kissed Emma on the lips, before entering her flat.

Closing the front door, Emma walked after her. "Congratulations, Gillian, you deserve it." She pulled Gill into a warm embrace. "How do you feel?"

Inhaling Emma's scent, Gill sighed, "Great." She began kissing her neck, before capturing Emma's lips.

"Mmm, I meant how do you feel about the call-up?"

"Excited, cautious, *horny*." She began manoeuvring Emma towards the sofa, emphasising her point.

"Gillian, we have a game tomorrow," Emma protested.

"A game that means nothing, whether we win, lose or draw. We are finishing second regardless of the result." Gill pulled her own t-shirt over her head and Emma began to waver.

"True."

"Have you never had sex the night before a game?" Gill whispered hotly in Emma's ear, before unbuttoning her shirt.

Emma was breathing heavily now and her reply betrayed her arousal. "Yes, Orla really liked to let her hair down on a Friday night."

That stopped Gill in her tracks, she stood there in her jeans and bra, Emma's shirt open revealing her underwear. "So sex before a game was the norm for you?"

"Yes."

"Listen, if you don't want to, I understand."

Emma's response was to pull Gillian to her and kiss her passionately. Gill responded in kind and the pair tumbled on to the sofa, hastily removing each other's jeans and shoes. The sex was quick and exciting, both women stroking the other to orgasm as they kissed passionately. They lay spent in each other's arms, breathing heavily. "Now that's what I call a quickie. Wooh"

Emma laughed and kissed Gill's chest, noticing the redness mixed with the tan. "You've been on a sunbed."

"Most Fridays, yes."

She noticed for the first time, the neatness of Gillian's eyebrows and she ran a hand down Gill's calf. "And you've been waxed."

Gill laughed lightly, "Guilty."

Emma took a moment to really look at Gillian. "You have had your bikini line waxed." She looked at the strip of neatly trimmed brown hair between Gill's legs, still glistening from their heated encounter.

Gill shrugged, "I like to keep it neat, as do you."

"I think you're a little vain, Gillian," Emma teased.

"And I think you're a little anal, with your neatly ironed clothes and your perfect posture."

"You seem to like it."

Gill laughed aloud at the unexpected reply, she had thought Emma would protest. Leaning closer to Emma she captured her gaze, "I definitely do." Then she softly kissed her.

The following afternoon, Gill and Emma arrived together for the final league game of the season. Their quick encounter had turned into a night of passion, as they had moved from the sofa to the bedroom. They entered the home dressing room to applause and Gill momentarily wondered if word had somehow gotten out that they were together, then she realised the applause was for her Scotland call-up.

"Well done, Gill, it's about time," Hilary said.

"Am I the only one who sees the irony in this?" Everyone looked at Laura, wondering where she was going with the question. "Gill was banned from all Scotland squads after getting into a pair of French knickers, and now her first cap is going to be against France."

"Yeah, Gill, this time you better skip the *ooh la la*, if you want to be getting more caps," Sheila cautioned.

Emma was quiet as she listened to the conversation, taking a seat in the corner.

"That's all behind me."

Laura laughed, "Yeah right, Gill. I reckon she will be looking for a repeat performance if she is there."

It was Hilary who noticed the strange atmosphere in the changing room and kicked Laura to get her to shut up. The defender stared at Hilary and the doctor motioned her eyes towards Emma. Laura's face immediately conveyed her understanding and she stopped talking. It wasn't a subtle exchange and hardly anyone in the dressing room missed it. There were smiles everywhere until finally, Hilary decided to release the tension. "So, what did you two get up to last night?" As Gill and Emma exchanged a *look* the changing room burst into laughter.

[Continued...](#)

~ The Player ~

by weebod

Disclaimer: This is an original story. The main characters and the story are the product of the author's imagination.

Rated NC17: For profanity and sex

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

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Chapter 31

The following Saturday saw Gill and Emma arrive early for the Scottish cup finals. Theirs would be the penultimate game with a starting time of 2 p.m. Followed by the men's final. The final would see the top two teams in the Scottish women's game battle it out for the final piece of silverware. Peffermill was a very busy place, with four finals taking place over the course of the day.

"This is going to be a tough game, Glasgow ladies won the league."

"I know, but we only lost the league by four points, and in the game they beat us at home, I wasn't exactly on top form, I think we have a good chance."

"They have eight players in the Scotland team."

"And we now have four. They are the established team, following years of dominance and we are the up and coming new girls. The amount of Scottish players doesn't count for much, we are a match for them on our day. We just need to get past the nerves, that's where they will have the upper hand. They have been here before several times, this is our first Scottish cup final."

Emma had to admit that Gillian had hit the nail on the head, she was tense and she could feel it running through her teammates. "Are you nervous, Gillian?"

Gill shook her head, "Not today. I'm excited and I can't wait to get started, but I'm not afraid to win. We are already playing in European competition next year even if we lose. This is about us as a team being ready to challenge the dominance of the top two and we have already split them this year. This is about proving we are serious and that means believing in ourselves."

Emma nodded, Gill was making a lot of sense.

Gill squeezed her hand, "Play your usual game, you are one of the most consistent performers for Dunedin this season and a big part of why we are doing so well."

"Thanks, Gillian."

The pair watched part of the men's Rose Bowl final, the competition contested by every team that was knocked out in the first round of the cup. Gradually the Dunedin players gathered in the same spot until it was time to begin their own preparations. Gillian had never seen them all look so serious. The tension was definitely building. In direct contrast the Glasgow players looked relaxed and confident, they knew they were already ahead before the game started.

Walking into the designated changing room, the first thing Gill noticed was all the new tops hanging on pegs. She walked over to number eight, knowing it was hers. "Ooh, these are nice." Holding the shirt up for perusal, she noticed the front. "We have a sponsor? Since when?"

Fay Williams spoke up, "The owner is a business associate of mine, she was more than happy to sponsor us when I told her we were in the cup final and would be playing in Europe next season."

"So, she owns this night club?"

"Amongst other places in Edinburgh, yes. This is her latest venture. If all goes well, she may give us money towards our European challenge, but that kind of sponsorship would involve a name change. For today, it's the shirts, with the name of her latest night club on them."

Sheila threw a bag onto the floor, "That's a debate for another day. There are new socks too, pick a pair from the bag."

Socks were thrown around as the players checked the foot sizes. "Isn't there a nine?" Hilary asked, as she sifted through the remaining pairs.

Gill was sitting with two pairs in her hands, debating which size to select.

"Give me the bigger ones, Gillian."

Gill liked her socks a little long, but Hilary needed the bigger size, so she threw a pair and they bounced off the doctor's head.

"Let's hope you're as accurate on the pitch."

"I'm surprised you didn't feign injury. Do you need a plaster?"

"Five minutes, ladies, then the warm-up begins."

Gill glanced at Sheila, she was being super efficient and clearly not in the mood for any fooling around from the players. Shrugging she finished getting ready and made her way out to a strip of running track, away from the main pitch.

"Sheila is wound up a bit tight," Hilary remarked as she stood next to Gillian and stretched her calves.

"She's nervous."

"We all are, I really want to win this, Gillian."

"Me too."

Hilary glanced over at Glasgow Ladies. "It's going to be tough. Eight Scottish players and three of them also play for Great Britain."

Gill nodded, "We can win."

Dunedin ladies gathered back in their dressing room to strip ready for the game and a few final words of wisdom from Scott.

"Okay girls, this is your moment. A Scottish cup winner's medal is within your grasp. Now you have to ask yourself the question, do you want to walk away a winner or a loser? If you want to be a winner then you go out there and give your all. If anyone comes off the pitch thinking they could have done better, then you will have let yourself and the team down if we lose." Scott looked around the changing room. "You have the ability to win today, now you need to believe you can win."

Gill nodded at the strong words from the coach knowing belief would play a big part in the day's proceedings.

The first half turned out to be a disaster for Dunedin. They found themselves two nil down. The penalty corners weren't working, passes were going astray and they were second to every fifty-fifty ball. The large crowd were subdued, hoping for a closer contest. The shouts of encouragement had become sporadic and half-hearted. Scott and Sheila did their best to offer words of encouragement and made a substitution at the start of the second half, swapping in Fay for the teenage striker, Melinda. It wasn't the switch Gill would have made, but it was Sheila and Scott's decision. The strikers were seeing little of the ball and the problem lay with the distribution from the midfield.

Scott added a few final words, "The next goal in this game is absolutely crucial - we *must* score it."

Gill knew that going down three nil would effectively be game over, leaving Dunedin with little chance of getting back into the match. She took up a position at the centre of the pitch, ready to take the pass back with Scott's words ringing in her ears.

The opening minutes of the second half saw Dunedin fair a little better. They had yet to manage one shot on target, but they were stringing some passes together. They were also living a little dangerously at the back with Lindy making two vital saves in goal, keeping them in the game.

Dunedin definitely had a little more purpose and belief about themselves and an interception in defence saw Hilary breaking out with the ball. She threaded a perfect pass through the opposition leaving Gillian running full pelt on to the ball. With only the keeper to beat, Gill touched the ball past her.

"Oof!" The air left Gill's lungs as she landed heavily on her back, looking up at the sky, wondering what had hit her. There was chaos all around and the crowd were on their feet. To add insult to injury, a covering defender slammed the ball hard against Gill as she lay prone on the Astroturf, causing further mayhem to break out. The Dunedin players, who had been rushing towards the umpire to complain, suddenly rushed instead towards the defender who had hit the ball at Gill. It had been a cheap shot to smack the ball into a grounded player.

The umpire, rapidly losing control of the situation, blew hard on her whistle, calling her fellow umpire over to assist her in sorting out the unfolding melee. Meanwhile Gill was struggling to catch her breath and the physio had come rushing on to the pitch to attend to her.

"We meet again."

Gill looked up into the smiling face of Annabel, the physio who had treated her last summer.

"Hi." Gill wheezed, "I think....winded."

"Just relax." Annabel slowly helped Gill to her feet, checking her appendages as she stood.

"My back...hurts." Gill held the base of it, rubbing away the pain.

Meanwhile, the umpire called over the Glasgow goalkeeper and issued her with a yellow card as the crowd chanted, "Off! Off! Off!" then booed when the card wasn't red. The umpire then called over the defender and issued her with a green card of warning. Sheila protested at the leniency, but the umpire explained that she couldn't be sure how much intent was involved in hitting the ball at Gillian after the whistle had blown.

With no reserve goalkeeper on the bench, Glasgow elected a kicking back, who put on a facemask. They would have to see out the next ten minutes with no goalkeeper and a player down. The umpire then awarded Dunedin a penalty corner as the original offence had taken place outside of the shooting circle. The downside was that Gillian was still off the pitch, and Melinda had come on to take her place. The usual corner routine was changed and Dunedin failed to get a strike on goal, Glasgow hastily clearing the ball out for a push in.

Gill was on the sidelines being treated, valiantly trying to get the air back into her lungs. Scott called to the physio, "Take five minutes with her."

Annabel smiled at Gill as she worked on her diaphragm, "You never called."

"You did ... such a great ... job, I didn't need to ... come back."

"I meant after the night we spent together."

Gill recalled that evening vividly. Annabel had given her the all clear to resume full training and discharged her. Gillian had then asked her out for a drink. The rest was history and a very memorable evening. "I'm sorry about that."

Annabel nodded, "You're breathing better now, let me see your back."

Gill turned to allow the physio access. "It's a bit red, you will probably have a nice bruise." Annabel instructed Gill to move certain ways as she checked out her mobility. "That's you done, another successful discharge from physio."

Gill smiled, "Thanks."

"You have my number, call me." The invitation was clear.

"I have a girlfriend now."

"And I have a boyfriend."

Gill hadn't known that, but it certainly made her feel less of a shit for not calling, she shook her head, "I think my five minutes are up."

Annabel nodded, "Good luck."

"We need it."

She made her way over to Scott and the Dunedin bench. "Swap back in for Fay," Scott instructed.

"Scott, I think we should keep Melinda and Fay on."

"We need you back on the pitch, Gillian."

"Then swap me on for Sheila."

Scott took a deep breath, taking his captain off would be a very brave decision.

"Scott, she is having a nightmare, just give it ten minutes and see what happens."

"Alright, but you will have to take over as captain."

Gill held up the number six and Sheila's attention was soon drawn to the change, the shocked look on her face would have been comical in a different situation. Gill shouted for her to remove her captain's armband and hastily put it around her right bicep, before taking up Sheila's position alongside Camilla in the centre of midfield.

After a period of concerted pressure, Dunedin were awarded a penalty corner. With no kitted out goalkeeper this was a great chance to get back into the match. As Camilla stopped the ball dead for Gillian to shoot, she instead flicked the ball directly into the midriff of the kicking back. She doubled over at the contact and Fay had a simple tap into the goal to pull one back for Dunedin. Gill held her stick up in a simple gesture of apology, but it was all part of the game. If you stood on the line, you knew you were putting your body at risk of being hit by the ball.

A minute later the Glasgow goalkeeper was waved back on to the pitch having spent ten minutes in the sin bin. With the numerical balance restored the game was more evenly matched with both teams cancelling each other out. As the clock ticked down it looked like Dunedin would run out of time.

A final attack saw Melinda hit a hopeful shot that struck the foot of a Glasgow defender giving Dunedin a penalty corner in the dying seconds of the game. As Laura bent low to take the corner, the hooter went signalling the end of time. That meant that this was the final play of the game. When the ball was cleared out the circle, it was over. Laura drove the ball out and Jane Dodds trapped it for Gill to strike, the keeper saved it and the ball rebounded and again hit the foot of a defender. The game was still alive and Dunedin would have another penalty corner. The tension around the pitch was unbearable, but Gill knew she had to stay focussed. The players quickly discussed which corner routine they would attempt to execute and Laura again placed the ball on the back line. It was a clean corner, with the push and the stop executed accurately, that left Gillian with the ball to strike, but the defenders were out fast. Gillian, with nowhere to pass, dribbled past two runners and had a shot on, she faked to hit it and the goalkeeper committed herself. As she went to the turf Gill flicked the ball over her and into the goal. Dunedin, against all the odds, had forced a penalty shoot out.

There were muted celebrations as the players knew the game was far from won. Both teams were in conversation with their coaches, selecting the players who would take the penalty strokes. After a heated discussion the five players were picked. Camilla would be up first followed by Gillian, then Sheila and Laura, leaving the final flick to Emma. As Scott filled out the slip of paper, Sheila had a last minute change of heart. "Wait, put me last and Emma third."

Gill gave Sheila a questioning look, the captain had been out of sorts, in a rare off game for her.

"I'm the captain, Gill, I need to shoulder this responsibility."

Gill nodded and all the players gathered at the halfway line. Glasgow ladies would be taking the

first penalty. After six penalties, it was three all, no one had missed. The fourth Glasgow penalty taker stepped up and slotted the ball low and hard towards the bottom corner but Lindy was down quickly and produced a fine save, handing the advantage to Dunedin for the first time that afternoon. Laura scored her flick, and the final player from Glasgow scored hers too. It was four each as Sheila walked up to take her flick. If she scored, Dunedin would lift the cup.

The umpire asked Sheila and the goalkeeper if they were ready, then blew her whistle. Sheila flicked the ball straight at the keeper and Gill buried her head in her hands.

"It's a retake, Gillian, the keeper moved off the line before the flick was taken."

Gill looked up and couldn't believe it. Sheila would get a second chance. This time the captain made no mistake, flicking the ball into the top right corner of the goal. The place went wild and the Dunedin players were screaming and hugging each other. The cup was theirs.

The presentation got underway just minutes later. Glasgow Ladies walked up dejectedly to collect their runners up medals, then Sheila was called forward to lift the cup, quickly followed by the presentation to each Dunedin player of a winner's medal. Gill looked at the heavy bronze object in her hand. A female hockey player stood out from the circular object, and the reverse was inscribed with the event stating it was a winner's medal. Gill kissed it.

The Dunedin changing room was rocking. The jubilant team had returned there to find six bottles of champagne waiting for them, courtesy of their new sponsor.

Emma turned Gill around and began looking at her back. "Let me see you, that goalkeeper almost broke your neck."

Gill burst out laughing.

"What's so funny? She nearly killed you!"

"Are the Irish always so dramatic?" Gill had a twinkle in her eye as she teased her girlfriend.

Emma had been about to object, but instead smiled, "Only when it matters."

Gill pulled Emma to her and kissed her full on the lips right there in the middle of the changing room. There was a roar of approval and the pair were soaked with champagne.

"About time."

"Get a room!"

The pair broke apart and rejoined the celebrations. A bad rendition of '*We Are The Champions*',

was followed by chanting of '*Championees, championees. Ole, ole, ole!*' Accompanied by lots of jumping up and down.

Three hours later, all the Dunedin players were gathering at the clubhouse for the end of season dinner. The first team was understandably in buoyant mood, some already a little tipsy from over indulging in the champagne. Gill and Emma arrived together and took a seat at one of the tables, joining a few of their teammates.

After the meal, Yvonne Reynolds, the club president, gave a speech about the season. The most successful to date for Dunedin. Gillian was given a special mention as the first ever Dunedin player to be selected to join the Great Britain squad and Yvonne said she was in no doubt that a cap for GB would follow in due course. The four players selected for the upcoming Scottish international were also congratulated, Gillian amongst them. After Yvonne's speech each team captain spoke and awards were made until Sheila, the first team captain, took centre stage.

"Where to start?" Sheila waited until the laughter receded. "Well, it's been one hell of a season, ending on a high with our first ever Scottish cup win." There was more applause. "I want to thank everyone who has been instrumental in our success this season. Scott, our coach and the many other people who have contributed in lots of other ways, from the folks who do our match teas and, especially, to the people who have come out in all weathers to support us. We came second in the league this year, splitting the top two clubs who have been dominating Scottish women's hockey for the last decade. Our obvious goal for next season is to go one better, winning the league and defending the cup that we won today." There were cheers yet again for the mention of the cup win that afternoon. "Now we come to player of the year and I doubt there has ever been a more obvious winner. Not only was she the driving force behind the teams success, she finished top scorer in the league yet again. Added to that, she has been called up for Scotland *after* being invited along to the GB training squad. I'm sure you would all agree with me when I say only Gillian could have managed that one. Ladies and gentlemen, the first team player of the year, Gillian Rae!"

Gill walked up to receive her award to raucous applause. Yvonne Reynolds kissed Gill on the cheek and handed her the crystal statue of a hockey player. "Well done, Gillian."

"Thanks."

"Speech! Speech! Speech!"

Gill was notably embarrassed by the attention, but she held her hand up to quieten her noisy friends down. "I'm very honoured to be the recipient of this award. I'd like to join Sheila in saying that it has been a team effort. You guys have been outstanding this year. Here's to more of the same next season." Gill held her award aloft, before returning to her table and receiving a kiss from Emma.

"Well done, Gillian, you thoroughly deserve it."

"Thanks, Emma."

As the evening wore on the alcohol was flowing, particularly amongst the first team. Most of them wouldn't see each other for around ten weeks and Gillian was doing the rounds, making sure to say goodnight to her friends before leaving.

"Hi, Julie, how are you doing?"

Julie beamed her megawatt smile at Gill, "Well done, you!" She hugged her friend. "I'll be back next season, I can't believe I missed out on all of this."

"You had other things to occupy your time. How is wee Harry?"

"Fantastic, Gill. This is my first night out, but I'm not staying much later. I miss him already."

"You look fantastic, motherhood suits you."

"Thanks, I really am enjoying being a mum and Neil has taken to fatherhood, he adores Harry."

"That's great, Julie, I'm really happy to hear that." Gill thought back to Julie's husband's behaviour at the couple's barbecue last summer, she was glad to hear he was at least happy to have a child.

"I hear you're settling down, now that is surprising news."

Gill looked over at Emma who was chatting with a couple of first team players. The Irishwoman was sitting straight in her seat, with one leg crossed over the other, her hands resting casually in her lap. She looked beautiful in her little black dress. Gill turned her attention back to Julie, "I just might be."

"A lot of changes for both of us since this time last year."

"Goodness, yes." Neither of them chose to mention ending up in Gillian's bed after last year's club dinner.

"Well, I'm heading home to my boys, would you like a lift?"

"No thanks, Julie, I don't think Emma's quite ready to go. Will I see you at summer hockey?"

Julie laughed, "Don't tell me you're still going to be playing?"

"Nothing else to do."

"You're crazy, Gillian, I'll be seeing you soon then."

"Night, Julie."

An hour later Gill was opening her front door and inviting Emma inside. "What a day," Gill remarked as she took Emma into her arms.

"It was a great day."

Gill kissed Emma, taking time to savour her lips, the sweetness of the liqueur Emma had been sipping still lingering on them. Gillian pushed her tongue into Emma's mouth and it was eagerly welcomed and sucked on. Gill had wanted Emma since they had shared a brief kiss in the changing room that afternoon and now she was determined to have her. As she kissed her hotly, Gill massaged Emma's breasts through the material of her sexy black dress, feeling her nipples harden in response to the attention. Emma was squeezing Gill's buttocks hard, pulling the teacher into her, needing more contact.

"God I want you so much," Gillian whispered hotly as she tore her mouth from Emma's. Dropping to her knees, she swiftly pushed Emma's dress up her thighs and buried her face into the piece of lace covering Emma's crotch. She wasted no time in practically ripping the small piece of material from the Irishwoman's body, before burying her tongue within her folds. Gripping Emma's hips strongly, Gill used her tongue to stroke and lick Emma until she came hard, jerking and sobbing Gill's name as she struggled to keep upright. She slumped back against the wall, Gill's head resting at her stomach, her strong arms helping Emma remain upright.

Gill awoke the following morning with Emma in her arms. She was deeply contented, the previous day having been one of the best she could remember, and now she was with Emma, the Irishwoman's back cradled against Gill's front. Gill placed a soft kiss on her bare shoulder and Emma stirred, "Morning." She turned to face Gillian, a smile on her lips, lips that Gill couldn't resist kissing.

"Mmm, do you have any plans for today?"

Gill lazily scratched her tummy as she stretched, "I'm going to visit Charlotte after lunch."

Emma yawned, "How is Paws?"

"Growing." Gill looked at her, they had both missed the little dog since he had become Charlotte's pet at Easter. "Do you want to come along?"

"I don't want to intrude..."

Gill placed a finger gently on Emma's lips, "You won't be. Charlotte really likes you and I'm sure Paws will be happy to see you."

"Then I would love to."

"Great."

"You know, my parents almost came over to watch yesterday, I kind of wish they had. I would love for you to meet them sometime."

"Did they go to see you play when you were in Dublin?"

"Occasionally. What about your parents?"

Gill laughed, "They have never seen me play."

Emma sat up, which afforded Gill a great view of her pert breasts, her attention fully diverted there. "Never?" There was no answer, "Gillian? They have never seen you play?"

Gill looked back up at Emma's face. "No, never."

"Why?"

Gill considered her answer, "It's just not their thing. I never tell them what's going on with hockey."

Emma frowned, "Don't they ask?"

"No."

"I don't understand."

Gill sat up and gave Emma her full attention. "Do you want to spend the entire day with me?"

Emma wondered where Gillian was going with this. "Okay," she answered, slightly confused about what might be happening.

"Great, can you be ready to go at eleven o'clock?"

"Where to?"

"My parents."

"Gillian!"

"Look, it will be fine, and the visit will also help you understand things."

"What should I wear? What should I bring?" Emma asked with a hint of panic.

"Relax, they have no expectations in that regard, you can wear whatever you feel like, they will offer no comment or judgement."

Emma was more confused than ever with that answer.

At almost eleven thirty, Emma found herself standing outside an ageing townhouse on the east side of Edinburgh. The garden wasn't quite overgrown, but it was untidy, with the grass a little long, and plants and trees growing freely over fences and creeping up the stonework.

Gill looked over at Emma and laughed quietly. The woman had made quite the effort with her clothing, dressed very conservatively in a longish skirt, with a wraparound top, her hair up in a loose fashion. Emma looked great. "You look lovely."

"Then why are you laughing?"

The door opened and a woman in her sixties stood at the door. "Gillian, how lovely."

"Hello, Mum."

"Come in, your dad is out in his shed, I'll call him in."

Gill's mum headed off leaving the two young women standing on the doorstep. Gill motioned her head to Emma, "Come on in."

Gill led Emma to her parents' sitting room. The house had a worn feel to it, tidy, but the sofas and chairs were well used and the paintwork beginning to flake. Many bookshelves surrounded the walls, creaking under the volume of books crammed onto their shelves.

"Have a seat, Emma. This is the home I grew up in."

Emma sat down just as Gill's parents entered the room. "Hello, Gillian."

"Hi, Dad. Mum, dad this is my girlfriend, Emma."

Emma's eyes almost popped out of her head at the casual introduction. She watched Gill's parents, waiting for some kind of reaction.

"That's nice of you to bring a friend, Gillian. Would you girls like some tea?"

Emma nodded, unable to find her voice. Gill answered for her, "That would be lovely, thanks,

mum."

"Nice to meet you, Emma."

Emma looked at Gill's dad and all she could think of was a mad scientist. He wore a frayed shirt with a hunter green tank top sweater over it and a pair of worn brown cords. On his feet were what looked like a pair of comfortable orthopaedic shoes. "Nice to meet you too, Mr. Rae." It was hard for Emma to take her eyes off the older man's hair. He was bald in the middle and on each side of his head were two fierce clumps of curly grey.

Mrs. Rae returned to the room with a tea tray, which she placed on a coffee table. On it were Wedgwood china cups and saucers in blue and white style, with a matching teapot and jug, they were antiques. Mrs. Rae poured tea for everyone and Gillian handed out the cups and saucers.

"How's life, Gillian?" Her father asked.

"It's good thanks. I've been picked to play hockey for Scotland."

"Oh, I hadn't realised you still played. Did you, Margaret?" Gill's father asked his wife.

Emma almost choked on her first sip of tea.

"How have you both been?"

"Well, Gillian. We were recently at a science fair in Spain, it was very interesting, and your dad has been working on his latest idea for a biofuel."

Gill nodded, "Wonderful."

"We are going to London next month where I will be presenting a paper on the research I did regarding nanoparticles."

Emma watched as Gill's father picked up a Sunday paper and put on his reading glasses. He then picked up a pen and proceeded to do the crossword. She turned to look at Mrs. Rae, she could see the family resemblance, Gillian had her mum's eyes and nose, but that was where the similarities stopped. Mrs. Rae wore practical trousers and an oversized shirt with a pair of comfortable looking sandals. Her neatly cut short, grey hair and glasses hanging around her neck on a chain completed her look. Emma was finding it hard to imagine Gillian growing up in this environment.

"Do you travel a lot?"

"Yes, dear, usually to attend conferences and exhibits of interest. Since we both retired we still like to keep up with scientific breakthroughs and progress in our specific fields of interest."

"Ah, here is a terrific, very well constructed clue." Gillian's dad said to no one in particular. He

then proceeded to read it out to everyone. "Fundamental truth college head proclaimed. Nine letters."

"Oh, that is a classic, Edward. Do you know which homophone should be entered in the grid?"

Gillian's dad nodded, "Yes, PRINCIPLE, spelled as in Fundamental Truth."

"Yes, its positioning makes the one to use unambiguous."

Gillian sipped her tea, the entire conversation going over her head, while Emma sat wide-eyed. Ten minutes and not too much conversation later, Gillian and Emma left the Rae's house, both girls wishing them a successful trip to London, but there was no mention of Gillian's upcoming Scotland debut.

"Doesn't that bother you?"

Gill shrugged, "I've never known anything else, that's the way they are. Academics, they love science. Anything else is white noise."

"They have absolutely no interest in your achievements."

"They never have. Now if I was interested in science, it would be totally different, but they would be the same people. I would just be able to participate more in their conversation, instead I'm like a little alien. I have no interest in their passions and hobbies and they have no interest in mine. Sometimes I think I was switched at the hospital."

"Don't even joke, Gillian."

Gill put her arm out to stop Emma. "Emma, it's fine. Nothing to get upset over."

In that moment Emma did see a similarity. Gillian had the same temperament as her parents, it was incredibly hard to knock her out of her stride. "You're really fine with it," Emma said, it wasn't a question.

Gill smiled, "I am."

Chapter 32

"Stop!"

Gill froze and didn't turn around, she would know that voice anywhere.

"What on earth are you doing in my hospital?"

Gill turned around and rolled her eyes. "It's not *your* hospital, it's the NHS, Hilary."

"That would be Doctor Duffy right now."

"I'm visiting a patient."

"It's not visiting hours yet, get out."

"You can't be serious. I spoke with the nurses, they said it was okay."

Hilary looked over at the nursing station to see them smiling back at her, she knew Gillian had charmed them into letting her visit. Hilary shook her head, "Maggie is going to be okay, the knee replacement went well."

"You operated? She will be lucky to walk again!"

The nurses burst out laughing and Hilary gave them a withering look, but it wasn't working. "Get in." She took Gill's arm and led her into Maggie's room then left the pair alone.

"How are you doing, old woman?"

"You better have brought me something nice, Gillian."

Gill put Maggie's flowers on a side table and handed her some fruit and a box of Jelly Babies. "Stop complaining, I got you some reading material too." She handed Maggie a copy of Playgirl magazine, "That's for the lonely nights in here."

Maggie ignored the magazine, "Give me the Jelly Babies."

Gill handed the box to Maggie, grinning.

"It's open, you have been eating them," she accused.

"Just a little, I got hungry."

Maggie pulled out a Jelly Baby and frowned, she pulled out a few and they were all the same. "You've bitten off all the right legs!"

Gill burst out laughing and Maggie threw the box at her. "That's it, get out."

Ducking Gillian laughed, "Don't be so dramatic."

"I hate this, Gill. Stuck here until my new knee is good enough to walk on."

"You will be out early next week."

Maggie sighed, "I know, but needing a new knee at my age, it's not good, Gill."

"Ahh, I know what this is, people get depressed after surgery."

"Gillian." Maggie motioned Gill closer with her hand, looking like she had a secret to tell her. Gill leaned her ear towards Maggie and the older woman smacked her on the head.

"Ouch!"

"You're not helping."

Gill rubbed her head looking incredulously at Maggie, "You are going to be absolutely fine, you feisty old wench."

"That's better. I'll be at Peffermill next weekend."

"Where on earth else would you be?"

"Exactly and don't you let me down, I want a good show."

"If I get on, I will give it my best."

"You damn well better get on or there will be hell to pay."

Gill laughed, Maggie was going to be fine, if a little immobile for a while. Gill cautiously took a seat on the edge of Maggie's bed. "Emma met my parents on Sunday."

Maggie bit back a laugh, "How did that go?"

"As you might expect. She was quite worked up initially, but then she kind of understood I think."

"I remember the first time I met them at a parent teacher meeting, I was in shock for a week. I just couldn't get over you being their daughter."

"I think that's where Emma is at, still trying to get her head around it."

"What are her parents like?"

"I've no idea, I haven't met them, I've met her sister though, Julia, well now she is Sister Dolores, she's a nun."

Maggie laughed, "You two are going to be perfect for each other."

There was a soft knock at the door and Maggie called for them to come in. Emma popped her head inside.

"I heard you were here terrorising the patients."

"Emma, come in."

Gill's eyes lit up as Emma stepped inside wearing her OT uniform. She looked hot and Gill decided there and then this was a definite turn on for her. "You look lovely."

"I was just about to finish, but when Hilary said you were here I thought I would say hello before I head home." She turned to Maggie, "How are you feeling Mrs. McLure?"

"Oh, Emma, I've told you to call me Maggie," the older woman admonished, but secretly was impressed with Emma's manners and professionalism. "I'm doing fine."

"Good, well I'll see you tomorrow morning and, Gillian, I'll call you later?"

Gill couldn't keep the smile from her face as she simply enjoyed seeing Emma in her working environment. Even at the end of the working day the woman was immaculately turned out. "I look forward to it."

The three women said their goodbyes and Maggie turned her attention back to Gillian. "You really light up when she is around."

Gill nodded, "Justine told me that once."

"How's little Charlotte?"

"I saw her on Sunday, she's running around as good as ever. She loves her dog."

"She still asking for her mummy?"

Gill sighed sadly., "Not so much anymore."

"Kids adapt better than adults, Gill."

"It's a good thing, but it's also sad."

Maggie rubbed the back of Gill's hand, then gave it a squeeze. "You miss her, it's okay to say that, Gillian."

"I wish she was here to share all this with me, Maggie. Justine believed I could do it, she was always telling me she was looking forward to seeing me run out for Scotland."

Maggie pulled Gillian to her for a hug. There was nothing she could say. The door opened and Hilary popped her head in, "Oh for goodness sake, now you're getting into bed with my patients."

The pair smiled sadly at Hilary and she knew they were sharing a moment, "Five minutes, Gill, and then I need to see Maggie," the doctor said compassionately.

"No problem, Hilary, thanks." The door closed and Gill turned her attention back to Maggie, "I'll get a couple of tickets to you for next weekend, Justine's mum, Pauline, is bringing Charlotte along too."

"I'm looking forward to it, Gill, I'll watch out for them and sit with them."

"Thanks, Maggie."

Gill hugged the woman who had gone from teacher, to friend and then colleague over the years. She still wore every cap for Gillian. "Hang in there, you will be back on your feet in no time."

Chapter 33

Gill left the hotel where the team had stayed overnight. The bus taking them the short trip to Peffermill, where they would play the friendly against France. Most of the players were relaxed, they had been here before and knew what to expect, but Gillian was the only new player among them and she was named on the team sheet. It was a bright, sunny June day, it would be warm, Gill sat on the bus in her Scotland tracksuit, the top removed, alone with her thoughts.

"Nervous, Gillian?"

Gill turned to Camilla Cameron, her Dunedin teammate, normally a woman of few words, but she had played several times for Scotland now.

"A little."

"It's always like this your first time, then you relax a bit for the friendlies, but not the big games."

Gill nodded.

"Good luck."

"Thanks, Camilla."

The bus pulled into the car park and the team disembarked, heading for the home changing room. Inside everyone's strip was laid out. Gill saw hers with three simple letters on the back that meant everything to her. RAE

She walked over to her place, taking a moment to admire the dark navy blue and white of Scotland's colours, before sitting down. The coach waited until they were all settled before drawing everyone's attention to the tactics board. They had been over the plays several times, but he wanted to make sure everyone had them memorised. He spoke again of the danger women in the French squad and how they would contain the threat. He also spoke of their weaknesses and how Scotland would exploit them. He was impassioned and confident, two qualities he hoped to instil in the team.

Gillian felt her mouth dry and was continually sipping water and Lucozade, it wasn't the warm weather that was making her thirsty. The players went out for their warm-up wearing their training shirts and tracksuits. They knew the starting eleven and Gillian wasn't in it. She would be taking a place on the bench when the game started. Gill wasn't disappointed, with the rolling subs rule, it was unlikely you would get your first cap by starting a game, but by coming on part way through for a short while and building from there. The warm-up was taken by the fitness coach, putting the players through their paces, making sure all the important muscle groups were worked. Then they went through the stick drills, getting their eye in. The players then returned to the dressing room to put on their strips and hear some last minute words of wisdom from the coach.

Gill pulled on the tight fitting shirt, stretching it over her torso. She took a brief moment to savour the feeling, taking note of the butterflies in her stomach. Rubbing a hand over her abdomen Gill swallowed and took a deep breath, it was time to focus solely on what she was good at. Playing hockey.

A knock on the changing room door signalled time for the team to walk out on to the pitch. The team manager reminded the players not to leave anything behind that they would need. Gum shields, gloves, shinguards. Gillian made sure her gum shield was in her mouth and her glove was on her left hand, she didn't want to forget anything, but in truth, she would have happily played without them.

The two teams walked out to warm applause. It was a modest crowd for the friendly game, but the nice weather had seen a couple of hundred spectators turn up. The players lined up in the centre of the pitch, facing the crowd, for the National anthems. Gillian hadn't even given a thought to this and found herself towards the end of the Scottish squad listening to the French anthem. When 'Flower of Scotland' started, Gill felt her jaw tense as she struggled to sing the words. She blinked back the unexpected tears of emotion as the final strains of the bagpipes rang out. The starting eleven players removed their tracksuit tops and took up their places on the pitch and Gillian found herself taking a seat in the dugout, catching her breath.

As the first half unfolded, Gill spent most of it warming the bench, with the occasional stint jogging and stretching at the side of the pitch, wearing a bright orange warm up vest over her strip. She watched the action on the pitch, both teams fairly evenly matched, but Scotland having

the greater share of possession, although yet to make that advantage count. As the scoreless first half was brought to a close, both teams made their way inside for the half-time team talk.

The situation was strange to Gillian, she was listening to a team talk about tactics and what was going right and what was going wrong in a game of hockey, and yet she felt no part of it. Usually she would be participating fully at half time, but had no point to make or discuss. All she could do was sit and wait for her opportunity.

Ten minutes later the teams were back out on the pitch to start the second half. Scotland enjoyed some early pressure which saw them awarded a string of penalty corners all of which they squandered or France defended well. When Scotland were awarded another corner, Gill twitched with anticipation, certain she would be brought into the fray, but the coach never even looked her way.

There were murmurs in the crowd, especially amongst Gillian's supporters. "What the hell is he playing at? That's seven corners wasted." Hilary complained.

"Come on, put Gillian on," Came a rather loud male voice from somewhere behind Hilary. She turned to see Maggie McLure and her husband, who was the owner of the booming voice.

"The idiot wouldn't know talent if it got up and bit him," Maggie proclaimed, which caused a few laughs around them.

Gill sat back, resigned to remain on the bench and not see any action today. It was disappointing, but something she supposed she would have to get used to. She was now a small cog in a big wheel. Gone was any nervousness, her stomach was settled, breathing smooth and even, all anticipation removed. With only one eye on the game, Gillian found her thoughts drifting towards Emma. She hadn't really seen much of the Irishwoman in the last week because of the time and preparation involved in being part of the Scotland squad. Gill felt more relaxed now than she had at any time in the last week and was looking forward to this whole experience ending. A loud blast on the umpire's whistle brought Gill back to reality as Scotland were awarded yet another penalty corner.

"Right, Gillian, you're on for Alison."

Gill looked at the coach, blinking her surprise.

"You call the routine and show us all how it's done."

Gill nodded and quickly shed the orange vest she was wearing. As she jogged the short distance to the halfway line, she was handed Alison's number to hold up, indicating the player was being replaced. The Scottish captain was already calling Alison and indicating she was leaving the field of play, it was like some well oiled machine had sprung to life as Alison ran towards Gillian and took the number from her hand. Gillian really didn't have time to think about what was happening. She ran towards the players involved in the penalty corner routine and they quickly huddled together and Gill called the set piece, one of her favourites. It was the play that came to

mind as she had watched the penalty corners fail.

The umpire hurried Scotland up as they took a few extra seconds to set up the routine. As Gillian walked away from the striker position there were a few murmurs going around.

"What is she doing?" Maggie asked Hilary.

Hilary smiled, "Just wait and see."

As the whistle went Gillian immediately sprinted to the opposite side of the shooting circle. The ball was played out hard to the stopper, who turned her body and fired the ball off target, wide towards the back post where the onrushing Gillian met it full on and slammed it hard against the backboards. The crowd cheered loudly and the players celebrated on the pitch.

"Now that's what you call making an impact," Hilary declared as she slapped Emma on the back.

As Gill made her way back towards the halfway line she pumped her fist, showing off a well-defined bicep in her sleeveless top. A random female in the crowd squealed, "She is *so* hot!" and her friends agreed.

Emma turned to Hilary and blinked her surprise to which Hilary burst out laughing. "She is looking rather buff these days."

Emma nodded, "She put on a little weight earlier in the year, after she went on the pill, she converted it to muscle."

Hilary frowned, "Gillian is using the contraceptive pill?"

Emma nodded, "Yes, after she went to the first GB training session, they arranged for her to attend the Edinburgh University sports science department. She has been seeing a doctor, dietician and a sports psychologist. She is using the pill so she can control when she has her period, they don't want her menstruating on the day of a big game."

"Makes sense." Hilary smiled, "Our girl really has hit the big time."

Emma agreed, "That she has."

At the final whistle Gill shook hands with the opposition players and received the congratulations of her teammates and the coaching staff, but her eyes were scanning the crowd, looking for familiar faces. When she spotted her little band of supporters, she made her way into the crowd.

"Well played, Gillian."

"Well done, Gill."

She graciously thanked the strangers for their warm wishes as she continued on her way. The applause and cheers leaving no doubt that her friends were pleased.

"Brilliant, Gill. Just brilliant. What an entrance, you scored with your first touch of the ball."

"Thanks, Hill's. I thought I wasn't going to get on." Gill turned to hug Emma and received a soft peck on the lips.

"Well done, Gillian." Emma smiled warmly at her girlfriend.

"Gilly!"

Gill scooped Charlotte up into her arms and hugged her. She couldn't stop the tears from flowing down her cheeks.

"Are you hurt, Gilly?"

Gill nodded as she wiped the tears from her eyes, trying to be brave in front of the little girl, "Just a little bit."

Charlotte became very serious and her eyes narrowed, "Did a bad lady hit you again?"

Gill bit her bottom lip and tried not to laugh, instead she hugged Charlotte and told her she loved her.

"I love you too, Gilly."

Gill passed Charlotte back to her grandmother and immediately turned and buried her face in Emma's shoulder. Gill shook as she sobbed her heart out, soaking Emma's neck and shoulder as the OT held her in a comforting embrace. Gill's friends stood around the pair, blocking them from view, offering them as much privacy from prying eyes as was possible. Gill was sobbing for the loss of Justine and for what she had achieved in her absence, and wishing Justine were there to share it with her.

Gillian watched as Therese walked towards her, a seductive smile on her face. She stood and sipped her water, waiting for the French woman to arrive.

"Gillian, it has been a long time."

The accented English was almost Gill's undoing, anything that came out of the woman's mouth sounded sexy. Gill nodded and raised her glass, "Therese."

"You know, Gillian, you were cute eight years ago, but now you are a beautiful woman."

"And your English has improved a lot."

"As I remember, language was no barrier the last time we met."

Gill nodded, recalling their passionate encounter a few years back. "Very true."

Therese stroked Gillian's bare arm. "I am in room 312, I will be waiting..." Therese paused before leaning towards Gill's ear, "Naked."

That last breathy word caused an involuntary shiver to run through Gill's body and raise goosebumps on her arms. She watched as Therese sashayed sexily out of the reception room doors, before releasing a long breath.

"That is one seductive woman."

Gill turned to see one of her Scotland teammates, Janet, standing next to her.

"It would almost be worth missing eight years of international hockey for a night in the sack with her."

"I had no idea that would be the outcome at the time."

"The weekend is over, Gillian, you are free to do as you please, I think the only thing that's out at this stage is wrecking your hotel room." Janet smiled at her, "Have fun, I know I would."

Gillian swallowed and nodded her head, "Thanks."

"One thing, Gillian...Don't be late for breakfast, it's the last thing we do together as a team before leaving."

"Okay, I'll see you then."

Gill placed her drink on the bar and headed towards the elevators. Once inside her room she stripped out of her dress and removed her make-up. She then pulled on a T-shirt and her tracksuit and called Emma.

"Can you meet me at my flat in ten minutes?"

"Gillian? Is everything alright?"

"Yes, I just need to see you. Please."

"I'll see you soon."

Gill pressed the off button on her mobile phone and put it into her pocket before searching for some socks and her training shoes. Grabbing her keys, she left her room and walked the short distance down to her flat.

Entering her flat, Gill immediately knew that Emma was already inside. The faint glow of candlelight coming from the open gap of her bedroom door was the giveaway. Gill gently pushed the door open and saw Emma reclined naked on her bed. At Gill's raised eyebrow Emma replied, "I was closer than you."

Gill stood rooted to the spot as she watched Emma rise from the bed and walk towards her. The sight was mesmerising. "You were brilliant today," Emma husked, while slowly lowering the zip of Gillian's tracksuit top.

Gill swallowed hard, "Thank you." She felt her tracksuit top sliding off her shoulders, then Emma was undoing the drawstring cord at the waistband of her bottoms. Gill was entranced, fully captivated by this slow seduction. Emma knelt down in front of Gillian and removed her training shoes, then slowly pulled her bottoms down her tanned legs, kissing a bare thigh as the flesh was revealed. She felt Gillian involuntarily shiver, and a sly smile played on her lips as she ran her hands up Gillian's thighs and kneaded her buttocks, they were firm and powerful, well defined. Emma knew Gillian had a great body, but she had never been more appreciative of it than that afternoon as she had the rare opportunity to truly watch Gillian play.

Gill's breathing quickened as she felt Emma slowly slide her panties down her legs. She closed her eyes and gently bit her bottom lip as she felt Emma's breath whisper onto her thighs, then Emma kissed Gill between her legs and she almost jumped at the tender touch. She opened her eyes and looked down, finding Emma staring up at her, then watched as Emma slowly stood, licking Gill's stomach as she neared her breasts. Emma then took her time to lave Gill's nipples before standing to her full height, bringing her eyes almost level with Gill's. "I want you to fuck me." The harshly whispered request combined with the unexpected expletive was Gill's undoing. She lifted Emma from the floor and walked over towards the bed, but turned at the last moment and deposited Emma on her dresser.

Emma shrieked at the unexpected display of raw power from Gillian, thrilled and excited by this side of her lover. No sooner was she sitting on top of the chest of drawers than Gillian's mouth took hers in a passionate kiss. Her tongue entering Emma's mouth, caressing and duelling with her, while Gill's hands squeezed and played with her breasts, pinching her hard nipples, before taking one in her mouth and enjoying it to its fullest, while Emma's hands grabbed Gillian's hair, pulling her closer.

Gillian wanted to devour all of Emma, such was her want for this woman. She dropped to her knees and buried her face between Emma's legs, which she put over her shoulders. Gill sucked and licked at Emma's clit, occasionally entering her with her tongue. Emma was in heaven, one hand behind her to steady herself, the other in Gill's hair, encouraging her. Emma could feel herself getting closer, the orgasm imminent, Gill could feel it too and began to ease back, taking the edge off. Emma opened her eyes and looked down at Gillian, wondering why she was

stopping, the predatory look in her lover's eyes sending a renewed jolt of arousal coursing through her veins. As Gill slowly stood from her kneeling position Emma caught the first sight of the dildo protruding from her groin, she had no idea when Gill had attached it.

Both women were breathing hard in anticipation of what was to come, Gill's eyes questioning and at Emma's nod, she slowly entered her lover. With a guttural sigh, Emma accepted all that Gill had to offer. Gently rolling her hips, Gill allowed Emma to get used to the size of the phallus before starting a slow deep penetration. As Gillian's momentum started to build, Emma met her thrust for thrust, enjoying the guilty pleasure of watching Gillian in the full length mirror behind them, her buttocks clenching, muscles standing out in sharp definition as she worked her magic. As Gill increased the pace of her thrusts, Emma wrapped her legs tightly around Gill's waist. The teacher then lifted her lover from the dresser and pressed her against the cold wall, Emma gasped as her back touched its surface, then groaned as Gill continue to thrust into her. Their bodies sticking together as the heat and sweat built up. Gill again moved them, sitting on the edge of the bed, she lay back and watched as Emma picked up her rhythm and worked her hips until she came hard, collapsing, spent and sweat soaked on top of Gillian.

Gill jogged back up to hotel in morning after spending an amazing night with Emma. Exiting the lift, she found the team manager and one of the selectors standing outside her door squabbling.

"I knew she wouldn't be in there."

The team manager looked towards Gillian and cleared her throat. Gill frowned as she approached them, "Is there a problem?"

"Where have you been?" The tone was accusatory from Marjory McLean.

Gill indicated her clothing, "Jogging. I'm not late for breakfast am I?"

"Ah, no, there are still twenty minutes until we meet for breakfast." Helen Meadows, the team manager, had the good grace to look embarrassed.

The pair were about to walk away, but Gill stopped them, "Tell me, are you knocking on the doors of all the players, or is it just mine?"

Helen bowed her head, while Marjory struggled to find words. "We just wanted to make sure you didn't miss breakfast."

At that moment Janet Wilkes walked past the three women, still in her clothes from the evening before. She smiled and went into her room.

Gill shook her head and opened the door to her own room.

Twenty minutes later Gill arrived on time for breakfast, only to find that she was amongst the first to get there, many of the players not joining her until a good ten minutes later. She ate breakfast, making casual conversation, passing the time until she could politely take her leave. On her way out of the hotel the team manager stopped her.

"Gillian?"

"Hi, Helen, what can I do for you?"

"About earlier, I wanted to apologise."

"For spying on me?"

"It wasn't my idea, honestly. The truth is I'm delighted you are in the squad, but Marjory, well she has had it in for you ever since you were a schoolgirl."

Gill shrugged, "I'll just have to live with it."

"Maybe not, the annual general meeting is approaching, let's just say Marjory may not be getting the votes required to continue in her current position."

Gill sighed softly, feeling indifferent to the news. It was all politics and a part of her had had her fill of it this year. She just wanted to play the game. "Thanks for taking the time to speak to me, Helen." Gill turned to leave.

"For the record, you should have been in the squad a long time ago."

Gill shrugged, she wasn't bitter. "I'm getting my chance now, I intend to make the most of it."

Helen nodded, "Bye, Gillian, I'll see you at the next squad meeting."

"Looking forward to it." And she was. She simply loved playing hockey.

Gillian walked home with her kitbag slung over her shoulder, feeling slightly weary. A part of her was still miffed at being treated like a recalcitrant eighteen year old. She put her key in the lock and opened the door, dropping her bags on the floor in the living room and heading straight to the bedroom, stopping at the sight of Emma sound asleep in her bed. Gill wasn't sure if she would still be there, but the sight of Emma raised her spirits immensely. She stripped off her clothing and joined her lover, spooning her and dropping a soft kiss on her shoulder. "I love you." Emma stirred and turned into Gillian's waiting arms.

Chapter 34

Gill parked her car in the school car park, it was a bright, sunny mid August morning, the first day of the new academic year.

"Miss!"

Gill turned to see Carla Tonner walking towards her, sporting her new senior school tie. "Good morning, Carla."

"I just wanted to say, you were brilliant playing for Scotland and thanks again for getting us all the tickets."

"You're welcome, Carla and thanks for coming along to support me."

"Anytime, Miss."

"What are you doing in school so early?"

"I'm a senior now, Miss, so I'm taking things seriously, I want to be a PE teacher, just like you."

Gill laughed, "I don't know what's more disturbing, the fact that you have chosen to stay on at school, or the fact that I have influenced your choices."

Carla laughed, "It's all good, Miss, oh and by the way ... you and Miss Hughes look cute together."

"Run along now, Carla." Gill refused to acknowledge the truth of her student's words as she watched Carla Tonner walk away laughing.

"See you later, Miss."

Gill shook her head and walked towards the PE block but, when she saw the figure standing outside waiting on her, she stopped dead in her tracks, the blood draining from her face. She had dreaded this day ever happening. She watched as the man walked hesitantly towards her.

"Hello, Gillian, it's been a long time."

Gill took a deep breath, attempting to calm down, she felt so angry, how dare he turn up now. "What do you want, Richard?"

"We need to talk."

"I have my registration class in twenty minutes."

"It won't take long."

Clearly Richard wasn't going to be put off and Gill closed her eyes briefly as she made a decision. "Follow me." Gill went into the PE department and said a quick hello to Dennis before leading Richard to one of the equipment rooms, where they were certain not to be disturbed. "Make this quick."

And Richard did, "I want to see Charlotte."

"Why now?"

"I've grown up since we were at college, I should never have walked away."

"But you did! Charlotte lost her mother seven months ago, she has never known her father and now you want to be in her life? Have you even considered the impact this will have on that little girl? As usual this is all about you!" Gillian was so angry with him, she could barely contain herself. Richard was a selfish bastard. In college all the girls fancied him, but he had chosen Justine and who could blame him, she was beautiful, but when Justine fell pregnant, he walked away when she refused to have an abortion and now here he was, wanting to know Charlotte.

"I think about her all the time. I just want to see her."

"Are you planning to go for custody? Are you ready to bring her up?"

"She deserves to know who her father is!"

"No, Richard, she deserved a father, but instead, she got you."

Richard slumped down onto a nearby bench, Gillian's words feeling like a physical blow. "I don't know what to do, you tell me what to do?"

Gill shook her head and sat next to him. "I'm assuming you're here because you feel Charlotte might need you?"

He nodded, "I feel terrible about the loss of Justine and all I can think about is Charlotte and what she will do now."

Gillian wasn't without sympathy, but there was no way she was letting this stranger waltz into Charlotte's life. "Well, Charlotte certainly is the most important person in all of this. You can't lose sight of that. Justine was a terrific mother, Charlotte always came first. Now Charlotte is being brought up by Justine's mum and her husband Brian. She needs stability in her life, Richard, now more than ever."

"How well do you know Charlotte?"

Gillian smiled, "Really well."

"Tell me about her?"

Gillian was hesitant at first, but he was Charlotte's father and she knew Justine would tell him, so that's what she did. "She is very much like Justine, not in looks, it's her nature. She is warm and patient and loving. Very bright."

Richard smiled, "Do you have a picture?"

Gillian made a quick decision and removed her mobile phone from her bag. She located the picture of Charlotte taken when she got herself covered in oil last summer and showed it to Richard.

"She looks adorable."

"She is, she had just attempted to fix the chain on her bike, she is very independent like that."

"Just like her mum."

"Yeah," Gill had a lump in her throat.

"Look, Gillian, I don't want to cause trouble, I'm not sure exactly why I'm here, I just felt I needed to do *something*."

Gill could understand that. "What if I send you updates, a picture every once in a while, that kind of thing?"

"And if she should ever ask for me?"

Gill nodded, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Justine spoke to me about that very situation if it were to arise sometime in the future and it all depended on you wanting to know Charlotte."

"I do, honestly, Gill."

"In that case, if and when Charlotte asks, she will be told about you and if she wants to meet you, then I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Gillian and if there is anything she needs, or Justine's mum, money, anything, don't hesitate to contact me."

"Justine made sure that in the event of her death Charlotte would be very well provided for. There is plenty of money to send Charlotte to a good school and put her through University if she wishes."

"I would have expected nothing less of Justine, I was crazy to let her go, but I was young and

immature."

Gillian couldn't disagree with any of that, "You *were* crazy to let her go."

Richard handed Gill a business card with all his details. "My email address is on there, perhaps you could send an up to date picture?"

"Sure."

Richard nodded, then stood from the bench and held out his hand to Gillian. She shook it, "Thanks. Gillian. I look forward to hearing from you soon."

As he turned to go, Gill had to ask, "Richard? You won't do anything stupid will you?"

"As you said, Gill, Charlotte comes first, I want what's best for her and from what you have told me, that's already happening. The last thing she needs is more disruption in her life."

Even though she didn't think he deserved it, Gill found herself thanking Richard. After all, if he really wanted to, he could pursue custody through the courts. He was Charlotte's father and that would put the family through hell. Gill slumped back down onto the bench Richard had just vacated, taking a moment to gather her thoughts. She had often wondered when Richard would mature or develop a conscience and make contact and now he had. She briefly wondered what the future held for little Charlotte, and decided to talk to Pauline about her and Brian officially adopting Charlotte, that way, they would be responsible for her upbringing without the threat of Richard changing his mind hanging over them all.

Gill glanced at her watch, she was late for registration. She quickly got to her feet and jogged to the classroom where thirty boisterous fourteen year olds awaited her arrival. Life went on no matter what and Gillian was still learning how to roll with the punches. Emma by her side had made that a lot less difficult than it might otherwise have been.

"You're late, Miss."

The sharp reply died on Gill's lips as she entered the classroom. "Yes I am, now take your seat and let's see who isn't here."

Ten minutes later, Gill watched the students leave and head for their first lesson of the day. She sat in her chair just a moment as she let the sounds of the school fill her senses, a smile playing across her lips. And so it began again. The new academic year and a new hockey season and Gill was looking forward to both, but this time, Gill wouldn't be doing it alone.

Epilogue

Emma stood next to Gillian as she laid flowers on Justine's grave. It was a bitter cold January afternoon, darkness beginning to descend. "Justine would be so happy to see us together." Emma was silent, simply allowing Gillian to talk and process her emotions. "She told me shortly before her death that we would be good together. I asked her why and she said that my face lit up whenever you were around. I then asked her why she thought you would be interested in me and she said you had the same reaction. Your face lit up when I was around."

Emma took Gillian's gloved hand in her own. "Justine was a very astute young woman."

Gill sniffed back her tears. "I really miss her."

"I know."

Gillian lay her head on Emma's shoulder and cried quietly for a few minutes, before returning to Justine's grave and sharing a few personal words with her friend. She didn't verbalise them, they were only for Justine's ears, she could almost physically hear Justine say *'I told you so.'*

Gillian thought about how she was coming to terms with her grief one year on. Some days she was philosophical and then she would unexpectedly feel a fresh wave of pain that almost brought her to her knees. She recalled going to court when the case was to be heard regarding the accident and how she had watched the driver crying in the dock and her anger towards him had dissipated. Going to court had actually been a positive move in the healing process; she was able to let go of her anger towards the driver from that day last November. Gill sighed and raised her face towards the heavens, it was still difficult to make sense of any of it.

The women walked slowly back towards the cemetery gates, welcoming the shelter from the cold as they got into Gill's car. "You know, Pauline was right."

"About what?"

"Charlotte barely remembers her mum."

"It's to be expected, she was only four years old."

"I know, but it's such a shame that she won't really know how amazing her mum was."

"She has you and Pauline to remind her of that."

Gill smiled sadly, "I know but..."

Emma nodded, "It's not quite the same."

"Exactly."

The Irishwoman drove them home to their new house, a two bedroom flat in the old town. Emma had fallen in love with the area as much as Gill had and they now shared the house with a new flatmate, though she was far from housetrained. Swap, Emma thought it was a crazy name for a dog, but Gillian had said she was the reverse of everything Paws was, a female golden lab who was messy and quiet. Emma couldn't disagree with that, the little dog also had an attitude problem, but they both loved the contrary little thing.

As Emma parked the car in their private space below their flat, Gill turned to look at her, a soft smile playing on her lips.

"What's going on in that head of yours?"

"I love you very much, Emma Hughes."

Emma melted at hearing the heartfelt words, "And I love you, Gillian Rae."

The End

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