

~ Conflict Of Interests ~

by Weebod

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

RATED PG13: Sexual content and mild profanity.

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

If you don't, you can reach Wolfie here: wolfie5@mac.com (g)

Warning: The following story may not be suitable for Vegetarians.

Elish Maloney pulled her dark blue Ford Mondeo into the first available parking space. Reaching over to the passenger seat she grabbed the handle of her brown leather briefcase and pulled it towards her as she exited her car. One day she mused to herself, she knew the well worn handle would snap, its days were clearly numbered, but she was loath to give up on it, it had served her well. Unlike her car she thought dismally. She slammed the door shut on the four-year-old model; lamenting the day she had chosen it. Thank God her brother was a mechanic! Next time she went car hunting, she would take him along. She knew he would agree, as it would save them both a lot of potential grief later.

Foregoing her jacket, due to the continuation of some of the best sunshine Ireland had seen in years, Elish wanted to make the most of every ray she could catch. She glanced around the car park while making her way towards the community centre, there parked just a few spaces away was the car of her dreams. The silver Mercedes convertible had been making an almost daily appearance in the car park for the last two months. She easily recalled the first time she set eyes on it. Having parked right next to it she instantly wanted to get back in her car and move it to another space. Brenda, her chain-smoking secretary was outside grabbing her first cigarette of what was sure to be many that day.

"Nice car." Elish said aloud.

"Belongs to a gorgeous blonde," Brenda replied lazily.

"Lucky blonde."

Brenda shrugged feigning nonchalance. It would be less than cool for her to be seen drooling over a car, a guy, sure, but not a vehicle. Elish took a closer look at her laidback secretary. Her hair was dyed with a combination of red over black, a pierced tongue completing the look.

Predominantly black clothing was a recurring theme, her makeup just the right side of presentable, not too much black around the eyes and the lips were still holding a hint of red, but they were veering a bit towards blue. Elish made a mental note to keep an eye on the lips. The discussion about Brenda's appearance had been an amicable one, where they reached an agreement on the shading, but Brenda did tend to add a little extra over the course of time.

"Who is this blonde?" Elish enquired.

Brenda had just taken a long drag on her cigarette; she exhaled the smoke while shaking her head. "I have no idea. I saw her get out of the car about half an hour ago. First time I've seen her."

Since that morning two months ago, Elish had not once seen the blonde owner of the beautiful car. At first she assumed that the blonde had started working at the drug rehab centre next door as a Psychiatrist or counsellor. Her friend Naomi had shot down that idea during one of their frequent flirting sessions. It was a harmless hobby, which they both found mutually satisfying. Elish being a lesbian looking for another lesbian and Naomi being a happily married straight woman, it had become a joke between them that had been born out of a drunken staff night out when they confessed their mutual appreciation of the others looks. They were both very striking in their own way, El, with her dark hair and blue eyes, standing almost six feet tall. Naomi with her ebony skin and brown almond shaped eyes not much shorter. They had been quickly dubbed the supermodels when Naomi started the job managing the drug rehab centre, well with the names El and Naomi it was only a matter of time.

The only information that El had managed to get in two months was from Molly, one of the community workers, who told Elish that she had seen the blonde go into the butchers a few times. Now El knew she was a gorgeous blonde with a beautiful car, who was probably not a vegetarian. Why Elish was so interested in this mystery woman was a mystery in itself. She consoled herself with the knowledge that she wasn't the only one curious. Even laidback Brenda and supermodel Naomi would mention the mystery blonde. She didn't even want to think about what the guys had been saying.

Elish sat at her desk and removed the folders she had been working on the night before from the trusty battered briefcase. Putting on a pair of reading glasses she booted up her computer and immersed herself in her work. The continual challenge of offering quality services to the local community while working within the constraints of a tight budget was one that El relished with a passion. She had become very adept at securing additional resources through donations and grants by virtue of good marketing and presentation. Seeing her labours bear fruit as direct benefits for the community offered its own reward for El. It kept her striving for more.

A knock at the door interrupted El's cycle of typing and phone calls. She raised her head and removed her glasses.

"Come in Molly, what can I do for you?" El took the opportunity to stretch her stiff back. Molly had been working at the centre for years, long before El started her current post. Despite wearing the hats of wife, mother, grandmother and fulltime community worker, Molly seemed to find the

time and energy for everyone she met. It was a skill Elish both envied and admired.

"Are you all set for Saturday?" Molly enquired, offering El a knowing look.

Oh God, El groaned internally, she had almost forgotten about the barbeque. It wouldn't be so bad, but she was hosting it at her house this year. The annual summer barbeque had become almost legendary since its inception by El nearly five years ago. All the staff from the community and the rehab centre was invited along with their partners. They saved for the first six months of the year just for this one event.

El plastered a smile to her face and tried to sound convincing. "Just about."

Molly, never one to be fooled easily smiled and sat down in the chair next to El's. "That's a pity, cause I was going to offer to help."

El let out a sigh of relief, "Would you?" She said hopefully, her face clearly showing her gratitude.

"Here's the list of what we need, all you have to do is get it and keep the receipts."

"Molly, you are a lifesaver! Thank-you."

Molly watched as El settled back down to work, putting her glasses back on. "Just one more thing El."

"What's that?"

"If you don't get to the Butchers and the off licence soon, come Saturday they won't have what you need." Molly grinned as she watched El grab her bag and make her way out the door.

"Be back in a little while!" She called as she exited the door in a hurry.

After a quick trip to the off licence El found herself standing in a short queue in the Butchers shop. She popped in here a couple of times a week but never at this time of day. She idly wondered if she would see the mysterious blonde this time.

"Morning El, what can I get ye?"

"Hi Johnnie, I have a list for our summer barbeque, I'll pick everything up on Saturday morning?" she explained while handing Johnnie the list Molly had given her.

"No problem El. I'll have it all ready by ten. Is there anything else I can get you?"

El, was now the only customer in the shop and that was probably the only reason she could think of that would explain what she said next.

"Actually Johnnie, there is. Where is the gorgeous blonde that drives the sports car?" El rocked back on the balls of her feet arms crossed as she waited for the expected gossip from Johnnie. He was a friend of two of El's six brothers and had been coming round the Maloney household for years. When Johnnie just stood there with his mouth open El wondered if he had some sort of affliction. The man was never short for words.

"Eh...she's right behind you." Johnnie looked rather stunned.

El turned round and sure enough, there standing right behind her was indeed a gorgeous blonde. A not very tall blonde, with lovely full lips and a cute little nose, whose green eyes stared passively at Elish. *Oh. My. God. Kill me. Kill me now!*

El was completely mortified. She had opened her big mouth at the worst possible moment.

"I am soooo sorry." El hoped her apology would suffice, but the option of running away was looking more and more enticing.

The blonde said nothing; she just continued to stare intently at El, with her arms folded across her chest.

"Can we start again?" El pleaded.

"Sure," was the simple reply she received. El wasn't certain if the blonde was offended or angry with her. She could read nothing in the intense look she was receiving beyond a quiet patience.

"Hi! I'm Elish Maloney." El offered her hand for the blonde to shake, along with a pained smile.

"Pleased to meet you Elish, I'm Aisling Keenan." Aisling took El's hand and grasped it in her own warm appendage.

El smiled with relief. It appeared that she hadn't overly offend Aisling, despite her less than candid question to Johnnie. She took a moment to let her eyes wander over the blonde. Beyond her face there really wasn't much to see as a white coat that had some suspicious Looking pink bits on it covered the rest of her.

"So...you work here?" El asked tentatively.

Aisling nodded, "yep, I make the sausages."

"You do?"

Aisling smiled at Elish' disbelief. She held her arms open to indicate her attire. "I sure do."

Elish was living a version of her own personal hell. Here she was standing right in front of a beautiful woman who was giving her every opportunity to chat and she could not come up with anything that would impress the green eyed beauty. *Yep, those are beautiful green eyes.*

"So, interesting line of work you have." El heard Johnnie snigger and she turned her head to throw him a dirty look only to find that he was occupied with something. Turning back to Aisling, El offered a charming smile to try to cover her feeling of ineptness.

She could tell that Aisling was trying valiantly to hide her own merriment. *Oh, great, she must think I'm a moron.*

"Well, I get to mince around and it's provided a few new links."

Johnnie howled with laughter and El knew that all her family would know about her worst chat up attempt ever before that night's evening meal. She wondered if her mother would let her skip Sunday lunch. She doubted embarrassment would be a good enough excuse. Looking into those green eyes that held her own with a confidence that almost unnerved El, she saw the amusement there and they both began to laugh.

"So Elish what do you do?" The blonde had taken pity on her and El was grateful.

"I'm the manager of the local community centre." El was beginning to feel more relaxed.

"Now I'm sure *that* is an interesting job." Aisling stated with real interest.

"It can be. Listen, I could show you around, let you see what we do. The centre is always on the look out for volunteers in any capacity, or there might be something we offer that's of interest to you? I can even throw in a free cup of coffee." El was mentally patting herself on the back for managing to string an adult sentence together that wasn't likely to offend Aisling or make El feel stupid.

"I'd like that." Aisling removed her white coat and threw it at Johnnie. "Johnnie I'm off to visit the community centre with Elish." With that they both walked out the door, El making sure to throw a smug look at a bewildered Johnnie. Maybe Sunday lunch wouldn't be so bad after all.

As they exited the butchers shop El got her first real look at Aisling's figure. It was in a word, magnificent. A tight red T-shirt covered a toned torso and figure hugging hipster jeans showed off a cute butt and trim waist. Two thoughts were running through El's mind, *please be gay, please be single.*

El held open the door to the community centre to allow Aisling to enter. She received a polite thank you for her trouble. She could hear the voice of her mother at that very moment *Remember. Good manners cost nothing, so use them.* It had been a piece of advice Elish had taken to heart from a young age. Today she was especially grateful for that advice.

The reception area walls were covered with leaflet holders, offering a wide selection of leaflets

containing information on a variety of subjects from healthy eating to debt management. Elish left Aisling to peruse them as she went over to talk to Brenda.

"Hi Bren, can you hold all my calls for the next thirty minutes? I'm showing Aisling around the centre."

Brenda glanced behind her boss to see the blonde who owned the sports car standing reading a leaflet. She quickly glanced back at Elish with a look of disbelief on her face.

"How?" Brenda managed to croak out.

"Natural charm." El responded with a wink. "Hold my calls?"

"Sure," Brenda had morphed back into her cool laidback façade.

"One more thing Bren...Lose the blue lips." El chortled as Brenda used those blue lips to affect a pout.

Elish made her way back to her blonde visitor. "As you can see, the leaflets are the first things you come across when you enter the building. Brenda's idea," El motioned towards her secretary. "It works well for folks who just want to get a little information and Brenda can get on with her job, with fewer interruptions. People only approach her if they need further information."

"Very practical and efficient." Aisling commented.

El smiled, "Brenda's appearance may not be to everyone's taste, but she certainly does a great job."

"Yeah, looks can be deceiving." Aisling responded.

"They sure can." Their eyes held for just a fraction longer than normal for a meeting between strangers. El hoped it was a good sign. Elish quickly introduced Brenda to the mystery woman before setting off on the tour.

"Here we have employment services. Folks can come here for all things work related. Anything from assistance with putting together a C.V to free postage stamps and use of the telephone to contact prospective employers. I'll introduce you to Adam, the section head and he can show you around."

Elish looked on as Adam introduced Aisling to all the members of his team. He was very solicitous, as she would expect him to be with a beautiful woman. El noticed that the blonde was very at ease around all the people she was being introduced to. Frequently offering a warm smile and a friendly word she seemed to have everyone eating out of the palm of her hand with her humour and easy going nature. After her brief visit was over with Adam's staff they left the room to a chorus of affectionate goodbye's and a rather indiscreet leer from Adam. When his eyes met El's frowning features he quickly buried his head in some paperwork.

"Where to next?" Aisling asked with an enthusiasm that El found both refreshing and infectious. She continued to show her round, explaining the various needs the community had for each service offered by the centre. They eventually made their way upstairs to the community education offices.

"Hi Molly, where is everyone?" El looked around the empty office.

"Mostly out on visits or at meetings, can I help?" El genuinely thought the world of Molly. Nearing retirement, she would be missed by everyone when that day came.

"Molly, I'd like you to meet Aisling Keenan, she's come for a look around the place."

"Lovely to meet you Aisling," she replied as she offered her hand to the blonde. Molly stopped and peered a little closer at the Aisling. "You drive the sports car."

Aisling laughed, "I do indeed. Nice to meet you Molly."

"Have a seat I'll tell you a little about what I'm working on." Molly proceeded to tell Aisling all about her latest project. She had set up a twice-weekly tea dance for the pensioners at the Town Hall. Outlining the project for Aisling, Molly provided the information as to how she got the entire project of the ground from funding to advertising. Elish listened closely to the conversation. When Molly had come to her with the idea she had at first been reluctant to commit to the budget required. The town hall wasn't a cheap place to rent out, but it had so far proven to be a great success with the over sixty age group and Elish was delighted for Molly. *Why the...she wouldn't? Would she?*

"What's that look for?" Molly enquired.

"A thought just occurred to me Molly."

"Congratulations." Aisling laughed at Molly's cheeky reply.

El narrowed her eyes and looked at the older woman suspiciously, Molly sat there looking like the cat that got the cream. In that moment El knew her suspicions were correct. Molly had gone and set up a hobby for herself that she could indulge in when she retired. *Well good on you Molly.* She could hardly complain when Molly had made such a success of the dances. A few minutes later they were ready to move on.

"We'll talk later Molly, bye."

"Oh. Elish, could I have a quick word before you leave?"

El glanced at Aisling who took her cue easily. "I'll wait just outside for you." She left the office and closed the door behind her.

"I know what you did," El stated, with a distinct twinkle in her eye.

"Oh, forget that El, besides you'll never prove it." Molly waved her off.

"Invite her to the barbeque?"

"Who?" El asked, confused.

"Aisling of course. Invite her along El."

"Have you lost your mind?"

"Mind your manners Elish Maloney, don't forget I see your Mam twice a week now."

"And...?"

"I'll tell her you've been chatting up the nuns again."

"You wouldn't?" Elish looked horrified. Her mother would be furious if she found out she had been teasing the sisters.

"No I wouldn't, but I had you going." Molly laughed.

"God, Molly. Don't do that to me."

"Tsk, ts. Taking the Lords name in vain as well." Molly loved to tease her boss, El groaned and she took pity on her.

"El, invite her along." Molly softened her tone. "She's lovely, and don't think I didn't notice the way you looked at her." She accused gently.

"We'll see, Molly." With that El left to finish the tour.

"So, what did you think?" They were both sitting in El's office drinking coffee.

"I'm impressed. The set up is fantastic." Aisling enthused, "I have a question?"

"Sure, ask away."

"If there was one thing that you could wish for this place, what would it be?"

El certainly never expected that, but she already knew the answer, it was her constant wish.

"That's easy, more money. The simple fact is, the more we have, the more we can do for the

community." She continued, "It's the most important and time consuming part of my job. Trying to secure grants and donations is a constant battle; there will just never be enough.

Aisling nodded, it was a familiar story.

"Do you think you might want to participate in anything the centre offers, or perhaps volunteer?" El prodded, always trying to encourage people to get involved, and make use of the community centre.

"Perhaps, but I need to think about it a little more. I would sure like to see one of Molly's tea dances."

"You and me both." They shared a laugh at that.

After they finished their coffee Aisling took her leave, El walked her to the door, wishing that she could spend more time with the cute blonde.

"Thanks for showing me around."

"It was my pleasure." El replied readily, Aisling had been a charming guest.

"I look forward to seeing you again." It was a statement that held a hint of something more, El echoed that feeling.

"Me too." They shared one last lingering look and a smile before saying their goodbyes.

El stood just inside the door and watched through the glass as Aisling made her way across the car park back to the butchers. When she turned round to go back to her office she was confronted by a grinning Brenda who gave her a knowing wink.

"Nice blonde." Brenda joked.

"Lucky car," was her grinning boss's reply.

El heard a soft knocking at her door. She turned to see Naomi striking a provocative pose in her doorway. Removing her reading glasses, El made a show of running her eyes over the dark skinned beauty.

"Verrry nice." She purred. "Good afternoon Ms Campbell."

"Likewise Ms MacPherson."

"Please, have a seat." El indicated the empty chair in her office, so Naomi opted for her desk instead. She perched on the end, arms braced behind her.

"Who's the blonde?" Naomi, never one to hang back, always cut to the chase.

"My, my. Do I detect a hint of jealousy?" El teased.

"Well that depends." Naomi leaned closer to El, "Does she know you come as a package deal?"

El burst out laughing. "Damn you're good Ms Campbell."

"But I can be very bad." Naomi dropped her voice on the last word, hoping to get some reaction from El.

El, made a show of licking her lips and raising one elegant eyebrow. "How bad?"

"You're a dog El." Naomi laughed.

"I wish." El scoffed.

"So come on, I want details. Don't think you can spend time in the company of a beautiful woman without me hearing about it."

"You know, she only left here about ten minutes ago."

"I know, I've been wanting to come over for the last half hour, but I thought I should at least wait until she's gone."

El laughed. "This place is unbelievable, you're all a bunch of gossips."

"Yeah, yeah. So come on, spill it." Naomi waved her friend's protests aside.

"The blonde is the mystery blonde, owner of the beautiful sports car. Her name is Aisling."

"Really?" El nodded. "Way to go El, so mystery solved?"

"Well kind of, a little."

"What do you mean? Did you not ask her about herself?" Naomi was puzzled.

El sighed, "Okay, tell me what you think? She's a smart, confident, funny, articulate woman who drives a lovely car and makes sausages for a living."

Naomi looked at El, "Sausages?" She drawled, clearly not believing her. "Pull the other one, El. It's got bells on."

"No, honestly Naomi, she makes the sausages for the butcher, she only works mornings."

"Well just what kind of sausages is she making? They must be some nouvelle cuisine speciality

ones, otherwise we are both in the wrong job."

"As far as I can tell, it's the same ones that Johnnie sells over the counter, there's nothing special about them. Nice enough, but, well they're just sausages." El shrugged.

"Hmm, so tell me, is she gay? Single? Interested in you? And when are you seeing her again?"

"I don't know to all of the above." El responded casually, but she wasn't fooling her friend.

Naomi rolled her eyes, "El, usually if you're interested in a woman you have her naked within an hour."

El looked horrified. "That is a complete exaggeration!" El held up a finger, part for show and part protest. "Once that happened. And I still regret telling you about it!"

"Calm down stud. Your secrets safe with me." Naomi grinned, delighted to have thrown her friend of balance.

"I was on holiday in another country and I was horny." El answered defensively.

"And the lovely American ladies just fell for your quaint Irish accent."

"I like to think it was my other charms that swayed them." She replied saucily.

"Well you do have a fine pair to be sure." Naomi leered at the charms in question.

"And you have the gall to call me a dog." El scoffed.

Naomi gave her a saucy wink, "well it's been lovely chatting with you Ms MacPherson, but alas I must take my leave of your fine establishment."

"Likewise Ms Campbell, enjoy your hovel next door. I daresay the scenery will be much maligned."

"Not nice El, not nice." Naomi chastised.

"I don't *do* nice."

"We'll see." Naomi said cryptically then left.

El's eyes narrowed with suspicion as she watched her friend depart.

El slipped between the sheets of her queen-sized bed. Tomorrow was going to be a big day. She

went over the preparations in her head, making sure there was nothing she had left out. Molly had been a terrific help, producing yet another list that El could use to make sure she got all the right condiments from the supermarket. She had been to the off licence that afternoon and picked up all the alcohol that would be required for the following day. Now she just had to make a trip to the butchers tomorrow morning to pick up the meat order. That brought forward thoughts of Aisling and Elish wondered if she would see the blonde tomorrow at the Butchers. She fell into a fitful sleep, with thoughts of the barbeque and a certain mystery blonde swimming around her head.

"Hi Johnnie, you got my order ready?"

"Sure do, El. I'm a bit busy can you just pop through the back and pick it up yourself?"

Strange, El thought as she made her way behind the counter and through to the back of the butcher shop.

"Oh my!" El gasped. There standing before her wearing nothing but a striped Butchers apron was Aisling, the mysterious blonde sausage maker.

"Hello El." Aisling greeted in sultry tones. "I thought that since you were so considerate the other day, I would return the favour and show you a little of what I do here." Aisling's smile was predatory and El could only nod a mute reply.

Aisling removed a butcher's apron identical to the one she wore from a hook and handed it to El. "Why don't you slip that on, while I start to prepare the ingredients."

"S...sure." El stammered. Without further thought she stripped of her clothing and put on the apron.

"Well, El, you certainly look the part, lets see how good your sausage making skills are, hmm."

Elish swallowed hard. "Okay," she managed to squeak out.

"I'm going to show you how to make wonderful pork sausages." El watched on in rapt attention as Aisling pulled a wooden stool close to the table where the sausage making equipment stood. Aisling removed a large piece of meat from a steel tray and put it onto a stainless steel work surface. "Now this is pork tenderloin," El continued to watch as Aisling ran a clean sharp knife over the piece of meat. "It is the most expensive cut of pork because it's lean, tender and boneless." she finished in a breathy whisper. Aisling began to cut the large piece of meat into smaller cuts, removing any fat as she went. "This is what makes me a good sausage maker, El. I care about what I put into them, much like a winemaker selects the best grapes for a fine wine." El nodded and licked her lips watching the way Aisling caressed her specially selected pork. "You see El. Good sausage making is a highly respected culinary art." Aisling looked at El, "Come closer, I want you to see everything I do." El moved to stand next to Aisling, her heart rate increasing as her proximity to the sexy blonde decreased. "Now we use the grinder to grind

the meat coarsely, like so." Aisling demonstrated. "Then we add the other ingredients, I prepared those earlier and mixed them with water. I wish I could tell you what was in these dishes, but alas El, I can't. It's my special secret recipe, or as I like to call it, the magic ingredients that got me a sports car. "El felt like she was being hypnotised. "Now watch as I grind all the ingredients together, this distributes all the ingredients evenly throughout the mixture. It might not sound it, but this is a very important part of the sausage making process. Achieving the correct flavour balance is critical in producing the best sausages. And El...my sausages are the best." She finished in a breathy whisper as she pinned El with a deep penetrating stare.

Elish found herself in a quandary. She was standing watching an almost naked beautiful woman fondle raw meat. Could a situation be anymore ambiguous for her? This was the question running around her head as she watched Aisling transfer the ground meat into the sausage-making machine. Aisling stood up from the wooden stool and offered the seat to Elish.

"Now for some hands on experience, you can do the stuffing." She whispered sensually into El's ear. Aisling smiled as she stood behind El and guided her through the necessary steps involved in the final process.

"That's it, feed the mixture slowly into the casing. Turn the handle at a steady rate. Feel your body become one with the meat and the machinery."

"Hmmm," El groaned as she felt Aisling's body press against her back. Watching the long chain of unlinked sausage appear and curl into the metal bowl, she could feel the blondes breathing grow rapid and shallow as the bowl filled with her artistic endeavours."

"Oh yesssss." Aisling hissed. "It's beautiful, I can't wait to taste it."

El's eyes flew open in disbelief. She looked around her bedroom not quite believing the content of the dream she was remembering. Oh my God. I just had an erotic dream about sausages!

Elish stood in her kitchen glancing out the back door into the garden. The sun was shining. Her barbeque grill stood on the patio ready for action. The patio and lawn were covered with various forms of chairs that she owned or had borrowed for today. She glanced at her wristwatch; it was 1:45 pm, not long till her guests started to arrive. Thinking back to previous years, El was prepared for the worst. The annual staff barbeque was always a boisterous affair; it was a day of letting your hair down and blowing off steam. El was glad that her nearest neighbour was about fifty yards further down the lane. Her cottage was on the outskirts of town, offering more privacy, added to that old Mrs Fitzgibbon, El's nearest neighbour, was a bit hard of hearing, which was sure to be an added bonus after a few hours of drinking. Elish fondly recalled the conversation she had shared with her neighbour yesterday.

Elish walked along the lane to the cottage where Mrs Fitzgibbon lived alone after her husband passed away a few years ago. She rang the bell and hoped that her hard of hearing neighbour would actually hear it. It was certainly loud enough, reminding Elish of a church bell!

"Hello Elish. Come on in dear."

El smiled politely and followed Mrs Fitzgibbon into her home. Knowing that Mrs Fitzgibbon didn't have a lot of visitors, El always accepted the invitation offered by the kind older woman whenever possible. Sitting on the comfortable sofa sipping tea and eating biscuits, Elish listened to Mrs Fitzgibbon talk. She was an interesting lady with an at times fascinating history.

"How are you keeping Elish?"

"Very well Mrs Fitzgibbon. Thanks for asking. How about you? How's the arthritis?"

"Oh, that's awful dear. Have you taken something for it? You know, I thought there was something wrong with your voice; it's not sounding the same. I was just saying to Karen the other day, you know Karen? She works at the post office. Well the post is just not arriving on time..."

And so it went on. Which was one of the main reasons Elish had taken to listening rather than talking with Mrs Fitzgibbon.

Elish recalled that she left the house without telling her neighbour about the barbeque. She decided to pop a card through her letterbox instead, which she had done that very morning. On the off chance that Mrs Fitzgibbon should hear anything, at least she knew that it could be coming from El's cottage.

Elish was pulled out of her musings by the sound of her own doorbell ringing. *And so it begins.* She took a deep breath before answering her front door to the first of her many guests that would arrive this day.

"Oh, you look well organised Elish." Molly pronounced as she set down a bowl of tuna pasta, her contribution to the side dishes. El hadn't been surprised to find that the first arrivals of the afternoon were Molly and her husband Bill; she could always rely on Molly to make sure she had things under control.

"I hope so Molly, I've been fretting over this since you reminded me." El replied, looking slightly anxious.

"Don't worry Elish, just have a few drinks and relax for the day. Now is there anything I can help with?"

The next forty-five minutes saw Elish constantly back and forth greeting her guests as they arrived. A quick head count assured her almost everyone was there. Just before three o'clock saw the arrival of Naomi, her husband Declan and one very unexpected guest, Aisling, the sports car

driving, mystery blonde sausage maker. Elish greeted her guests and gave Naomi a look that clearly warned *you have some explaining to do.*

A hastily whispered, "*She thinks she was invited,*" let El know where she stood, so she opted for a greeting that played along with the charade. "Hi Aisling, glad you could make it."

"Thanks for inviting me." Aisling beamed.

El smiled wondering when exactly she had begun to suffer from her current bout of amnesia. "You're welcome."

After that El's day took an unexpected turn as she tried to corner the usual suspects without raising suspicion. First up was Naomi, since Aisling arrived in her car, it didn't take Miss Marple to work out she was involved.

El had been patient. She was conversing with her guests while covertly observing Naomi, waiting for the right opening. She spent the rest of her time discretely observing Aisling. After all multi tasking was her forte. She watched as Naomi headed for the Kitchen, El excused herself from a boring in-depth conversation on consumerism with Michael the social worker under the pretext of getting herself another glass of wine.

"What took you so long?" Naomi asked, a smile on her face.

"I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about." El sniffed.

"I only came in here because I was fed up with you watching me, I thought I would do us both a favour and put you out of your misery."

"Fine, spill it?" El demanded.

Naomi mock shivered, "I love with when you get all dominant on me." El just glared.

Naomi sighed, "Okay, I went to the butchers and invited Aisling to your barbeque."

"That much is clear, so tell me why she thanked me for the invite?"

"Oh, that would be because when I extended the invite, I told her I was doing so on your behalf." Naomi replied casually.

"What possessed you to do that?" El sputtered.

"Well, duh! Because you like her." Naomi answered clearly stating the obvious.

"And you did all this of your own back?" Her enquiry held more than a hint of suspicion.

Naomi looked at the ground briefly and Elish knew instantly that she was contemplating what to

tell her.

"The truth Naomi."

"Look she didn't mean any harm, she just wants to see you happy." Naomi pleaded.

"Who?" Elish demanded.

"Molly." She raised her hands in a placating gesture, "She really only has your best interests at heart. She called me telling me all about Aisling and how the two of you were perfect for each other. After I spoke with you I called her back and she told me about asking you to invite her. I said you would never do it, so..."

"So the two of you came up with a plan." El finished, clearly seeing how this had played out.

Naomi looked sheepish, "Eh, yeah."

"Naomi." El dragged her name out, showing her exasperation with her meddling friend.

"Don't blame Molly, El. She really does just want to see you happy."

"I would threaten to string her up, but she has something on me. She knows I can't touch her," El, mumbled to herself.

Naomi raised her eyebrows, "Oh this I have to hear."

"She's threatening to tell my Mam that I've been chatting up the nuns."

Naomi burst out laughing. "The minx! Serves you right though, you shouldn't be chatting up women of the cloth."

"They enjoy it." El defended, "If I stopped they would be disappointed, besides it's a h..."

Naomi cut her off, "Don't you dare say it."

"Habit." El finished, impishly.

"That joke is as corny as the lines you feed the nuns."

"You're just jealous."

Naomi became serious for a moment. "Promise me you will make the most of this opportunity, El? Don't think I haven't seen you looking at her for the last hour." El mused that she wasn't the only one who could multi task. *So much for being discreet!*

"I'll think about it."

"Good girl." Naomi grinned, believing her work was complete.

By five o'clock the party was in full swing. Everyone had eaten his or her fill and the alcohol was in full flow. El's back garden was full to bursting with her guests either perched on chairs or sitting on the grass. The place was full of laughter and conversation. For the first time that afternoon El found herself sitting next to Aisling on the grass. The blonde had sat down beside her after returning from a visit to the bathroom.

"This is a lot of fun." Aisling said as she sat back a bit on the grass. El took a moment to let her eyes run over the exposed flesh before her. Aisling was wearing shorts and a cute cotton sleeveless top. El could see the muscle definition in Aisling's arms and legs. Nothing too bulky, but she clearly kept herself in shape. She had a light dusting of freckles on her arms. El thought they were cute, not an unusual sight in Ireland for sure, but Aisling's freckles were more fascinating than anyone else's. Even her feet were cute El thought as she trailed her eyes down Aisling's legs to where her feet were crossed over at the ankles. A pair of flip-flops leaving her toes open to the air.

They were both drinking white wine and El reached for the bottle nearby to top up their plastic cups. All thoughts of keeping the bottles chilled long forgotten.

"You trying to get me drunk?" Aisling teased.

El smiled, "Just being a good hostess."

They sipped their wine in companionable silence until Elish plucked up the courage to ask the question that had been nagging at her ever since they met in the butcher shop.

"I hope you don't think that I'm being too forward, but how is it that a part time sausage maker can afford to drive such an expensive car?"

Aisling smiled, she wasn't surprised to hear the question.

"My father bought the car for me. It was a present for my twenty first birthday."

"Wow, that's some gift."

"It sure is." Aisling replied softly, but Elish detected a hint of something underlying in her tone.

"You didn't want it," Elish stated. Knowing it was true.

Aisling looked at her, a little surprised that Elish had been so perceptive. She had been impressed by the way Elish handled the people around her during the short visit a few days ago. She had terrific people skills, but she had noticed that El also had a caring side to her. She seemed to really know people.

"I don't want to sound ungrateful. I did want a car, I was delighted to get a car, but the truth is, I would have been more content with something less showy, you know?"

Elish did know, she had sensed there was more to the car than it being a flashy status symbol. Aisling just didn't seem that type of person; El had known that within five minutes of meeting her.

"I'm still puzzled by something?"

Aisling grinned, "Why am I making sausages?"

El, nodded.

Aisling cleared her throat, it was time to come clean, "I don't."

El looked puzzled, "but you said...?"

"I know, but I just couldn't help stringing you along El. I mean you had just asked Johnnie about me..." Aisling sensed that El was not yet seeing the funny side of things.

"You were wearing a white coat." El gestured towards the blonde to emphasis her point.

"I know, I have to wear it whenever I pass through the butchers because of the raw meat in the back. I use it as a short cut to the offices above the shop; I can't access them from the pub due to the renovations. Whenever I'm in the pub, I wear a hard hat. I have to wear the clothing appropriate to my surroundings."

El was becoming more puzzled by the second, "So you don't make sausages?"

"Ah, no, I work for my father, as his accountant. He owns the shopping complex, he's your landlord El."

El's eyes widened in disbelief at what she was hearing, this little minx had strung her along big time!

"I'm sorry El, I just couldn't help myself the day we met. I mean, you had just asked Johnnie about me, I was wearing the white coat and..." Aisling shrugged her shoulders as she tried desperately to keep her laughter in, her face contorting with the effort. El was just about to say something when, her words were cut off by the shouting of some of her guests.

"Drink! Drink! Drink! Drink!"

El groaned as she realised the night was about to be elevated to the next level. The games were about to begin. She turned to see Rosie, another community education worker and Adam racing each other to down a pint of Guinness. Rosie beat him easily, he would never learn. No one had

ever beaten big Rosie when it came to downing a pint. His forfeit was to drink a glass of whiskey. Normally that wouldn't be too bad, but these were home measures. El knew Adam was going to be regretting this.

Every year someone came up with some new and inventive game, this year was no exception when after a game of truth and dare the Community Education workers produced two bin bags full of clothing that they had *borrowed* from the local charity shop. You had to select a card that had a style of music written on it, dress appropriately then sing until someone guessed the style. First up was Steve one of the drug counsellors, he stood dressed in a shirt and tie, holding a pint of beer and sang old songs for over five minutes until someone guessed he was a pub singer.

Aisling came out dressed in a ripped T-shirt, and some bleached jeans that were way too big. She started jumping up and down and screaming anarchy while playing air guitar, it only took seconds for folks to guess she was a punk rocker. El was impressed with the way Aisling threw herself into the game. She clearly liked to have fun. When Elish pulled out a card and read the word 'rapper' she couldn't believe it. There would be prizes for certain performances and the worst ones were sure to involve forfeits. She drank a bit more wine and decided to give it all she had. Ruffling through the clothing she found a baseball cap, some baggy tracksuit bottoms and a hooded top. It would have to do.

Elish walked with as much attitude as she could muster and swaggered into the back garden, her baseball cap on sideways. She started her rap, which she was just making up as she went.

"My name is Elish, that's with an E.
I know what I want so don't fuck with me
I like doctors, nuns, and accountants too
So you better watch out 'cause I'm coming for you"

The garden erupted into gales of laughter as she punctuated her performance with hand movements and crotch grabbing. She recalled seeing Eminem do that on MTV, it had struck her as odd, but she thought maybe he just needed to reassure himself that it was still there. Everyone guessed her song style easily and she ended up grinning and pumping her hips a little just to ham it up. It was only when she went to take her outfit off that she recalled her line about accountants. *Oh, shit!*

Come ten o'clock the party was still going strong, but a few folks were beginning to look a bit worse for wear. Adam had tried to chat up Aisling, then shortly afterwards he vomited on El's rose bushes. She made a quick note to get the garden hose out tomorrow. Two of the drug rehab counsellors were smoking hash. When El pointed this out to Naomi she had put her hands over her ears saying, "*La la la, I can't hear you.*" Rosie had joined them, but El reasoned she wasn't a drugs counsellor!

Elish needed to pee, so she headed to the toilet inside only to find it full. Not wanting to wait in the small queue that had formed she decided to head to the bathroom upstairs. There she found Naomi standing outside with an ear to the door.

"What are you doing?" she asked, clearly puzzled by her friends behaviour.

"Shh." Putting a finger to her lips she beckoned El to the door and moved closer. "Listen."

"Oh my god, someone is having sex in my bathroom!" El squeaked.

"Don't be such a prude, El. I wanna find out who it is."

"Don't be such a pervert." El, retorted.

Naomi scoffed, she knew Elish was as interested as she was, only protesting because it was her bathroom. "Like you don't want to know as well."

"Maybe." El reached down near the door handle and pushed a keyhole cover aside, "Go on then, pervert, have a look."

Under normal circumstances, El would never have shown her the keyhole and Naomi would never have taken El up on the opportunity to look, but they were both drunk, so Naomi looked with El leaning over her trying to look as well.

"What can you see?" El whispered.

"Hang on, nothing yet." She looked again, "Oh my god, I see feet!"

"Who's? Describe the footwear?" El was definitely interested now.

"Hang on, both sets are going in the same direction."

El looked puzzled, "What does that mean?"

"It means..." Naomi wiggled her hips, "they are in the same position we are."

El looked down to see her pelvis nestled behind Naomi's backside, "Ooh, kinky." In a fit of playfulness El grabbed her friends hips and pretended to hump her backside. Naomi started laughing and trying to get free of El. Next thing the bathroom door lurched open and they both fell inside, El landing on top of Naomi.

El looked up to see a stunned and clearly embarrassed Brenda grab her boyfriends hand and haul him out of the bathroom.

"Oops!" El exclaimed.

"That's what I was trying to tell you, but you were too busy thrusting against me." They both burst out laughing at what had just happened, El was still sprawled on top of Naomi, "Oh but your ass is so irresistible."

"Get of me El!" Naomi screeched while squirming beneath her friend, unable to muster the strength to free herself, because she was still laughing. Only the sound of a throat clearing behind them brought El to a stop. There standing against the wall with her arms folded across her chest was Aisling. One eyebrow raised and a smirk on her face.

"Don't stop on my account, I was enjoying the show."

El scrambled to her feet, a mixture of horror and embarrassment warring for territory on her face. She stood staring at Aisling with her mouth open and no words coming out.

Naomi jumped to her feet glaring at El, "Oh that's great, have your wicked way with me and don't even help me up." She winked at Aisling as she passed her heading back downstairs to leave them alone.

El cleared her throat, "Ahem, ah how much of that did you see?"

"Enough." Aisling answered with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Naomi and I aren't ah, you know, we just flirt, harmlessly."

"Oh, is that what you call it?" El said nothing, "And I thought that the two of you were trying to spy on two people having sex. I would call that voyeurism, or being a peeping Tom, or Tomassina as the case may be."

"But we..." El gestured feebly.

"Ohh, I see. You mean the part where you were humping Naomi's backside? Harmless flirting huh, I'm just not sure that would stand up in a court of law."

El stood rooted to the spot, her jaw slack.

"I've seen a lot of you tonight Elish Maloney. I've heard a lot about you too. Do you know there are quite a few people keen to impart information about you?"

"The snakes!" El interrupted.

Aisling continued, "I might even pop round to chapel tomorrow to see the nuns, I've heard they will have a few stories to tell also."

"The nuns are the only people I trust to give you good information." El stated worried about the kinds of stories Aisling had been told.

"Really? That's a shame, cause I've been hearing what a terrific boss you are, a fantastic catch. I could go on?"

"Maybe some of them know what they're talking about." El hedged.

"It wouldn't really matter to me what they say, I've seen enough for myself."

"You have?" El's voice held a hint of the dread she was feeling.

Aisling smiled, "Definitely."

Releasing a breath she wasn't aware she had been holding, El relaxed into an easy smile. Seeing an opening she decided to take a chance.

"So, I was thinking, maybe we could, go out sometime." She asked hesitantly.

"I would like that."

"This week?"

"I'm free on Wednesday."

"Great." El felt relief, "Would you like to go for a drink or maybe see a film?"

Aisling smiled, "Either is fine El." "I'll give you my number and you can call and confirm?"

"Great, give me a moment, I'll be right back." El walked to her bedroom next door and picked up the pen and pad she kept next to her bed, as she turned to leave she saw Aisling standing just inside the door."

"I'm sorry, someone was coming up the stairs, so I..." Aisling trailed off, she wasn't sure what to do when she heard someone coming up the stairs, in hindsight it seemed a dumb idea to wander into El's bedroom. She was attracted to El; but she just didn't want to give her the wrong idea, or come across as easy.

"No, that's fine. Come on in." Aisling walked into the bedroom and perched on the end of El's bed. El sat next to her and handed Aisling the pen and paper, to write down her details.

"That's my home and my mobile number."

"Thanks." El took the pen and paper from Aisling and wrote her own details on a piece of paper for the blonde. "This is my numbers."

"Thanks," Aisling hesitated a moment. "Did you really invite me here today El?" Her hand idly smoothed over El's duvet cover. "It's just that when you first saw me today, you kind of looked surprised, well, actually you looked stunned."

Elish knew she couldn't lie to Aisling. Telling the truth was the only real option she had. "No, I didn't. We were set up and under other circumstances I may have been a little upset with the meddling of a couple of friends, but I'm not. I really wanted to invite you myself."

"Why didn't you?"

Elish took a moment to consider that question. "I was feeling a little shy. I know that might be difficult to believe after what you witnessed a few moments ago," El added wryly, "but you seem to bring out the shy girl in me."

"Really?" Aisling questioned a little surprised by El's admission.

El nodded, "Really. I like you Aisling; you're smart, funny and beautiful. I guess that made me a little more nervous."

Aisling blushed a beautiful pink, much to El's delight, "I guess since you're being so honest with me I should return the favour." El's ears perked up at this; she was very interested in what Aisling had to say. "When I was standing behind you in the butchers the other day, it was no accident." El's eyebrows shot up at this confession. "I've seen you before a few times and I thought you were a knockout. I've been driving Johnnie crazy at the butchers asking questions about you. He suggested that I find a way to introduce myself and that's what I was about to do that day, but you asked Johnnie about me first."

They both laughed at the way things had played out. "Much though I would love to stay here chatting I suppose I better go see how my guests are doing."

"Yes, of course. I've really had a lot of fun today."

"Me too." They both looked at each other, neither really wanting to move from their quiet sanctuary. El, simply because she was the host forced herself to her feet. She offered Aisling her hand to assist her to stand.

"I'll call you Monday to confirm details for Wednesday?"

Aisling nodded, "I look forward to it."

El felt herself lean forward slowly, she knew she was drunk and that was a major factor in the risk she was taking but she just had to taste the blonde's lips.

She slowly brushed her lips over Aisling's. It was the softest of touches. El leaned back a fraction, leaving mere millimetres between them, when Aisling made no move to withdraw El kissed her again, this time lingering longer. Aisling's hands made their way onto El's hips offering further encouragement. El deepened the kiss as Aisling responded to her touch. Someone moaned, El wasn't sure who. Her hand moved into Aisling's hair, fingers gently caressing the back of her neck. A throat clearing caused them to break apart. El looked towards the door to see an unapologetic smile on Naomi's face.

"I hate to break up your little party, but some of your guests are starting to leave."

"Okay, thanks Naomi." El looked at Aisling, "I guess I better get back downstairs."

Almost two hours later and the last guests were leaving. It had been a very long day, but one that El had enjoyed immensely. Naomi, Declan and Aisling were the only guests remaining. El had just gone into the kitchen putting some glasses into the sink for washing up later. Naomi popped up behind her. "That's us leaving now stud, I ah, assume we are giving Aisling a lift home?"

"Of course!" El spluttered.

"Well you know, after what I saw in your bedroom..."

"I like her a lot Naomi. I'm not going to risk blowing it by trying to sleep with her before we even go on a date."

"Just teasing El, I'm really happy for you. I hope things work out."

"Thanks Naomi." El lightened the mood again. "You realise that I'm off limits now, no more flirting?"

"We'll see." Naomi leered and El chuckled. "Listen, we'll give you a little privacy to say goodnight properly to Aisling. I'll send her through here."

"Wai..." El never got to finish her protest. Aisling walked into the kitchen moments later.

"Naomi said..."

"We've been set up again. I tried to stop her, but she insisted that we have some privacy to say goodnight."

"Ah, I see." Aisling ducked her head. The moment was a bit awkward for both of them.

"I'll call you Monday." El said softly.

"I look forward to it."

They both chuckled, a little nervous.

"I better get going." Aisling stated.

El nodded, "Sure." she walked forward to lead Aisling back to her friends, when the accountants hand on her arm stopped her forward momentum their arms slid around each other as they melted into a warm embrace. El leaned back and looked down into Aisling's eyes, she stroked her cheek and leaned down for another kiss. With the full length of their bodies pressed together this kiss was a little more intimate than the previous one they shared.

El groaned in dismay and pulled back from Aisling. "God, I don't want to stop kissing you." She said a little breathless from the activity and arousal beginning to seep through her body.

"Me neither...but I suppose we have to." Aisling lamented.

"Yeah." El took Aisling's hand and led her towards the front door and a waiting Naomi and Declan.

"Ah, here they are," Declan said, "Naomi said you two would be at least twenty minutes." He laughed as they both looked too Naomi, who just shrugged. They said their goodbyes and El and Aisling shared one last chaste kiss before they headed out to the car.

"Safe journey home you guys." El called and with a final wave the car began to move away.

El locked up downstairs, glancing around as she went. Her place didn't look too bad considering the party she had hosted. She climbed the stairs to the bathroom, going through her nightly routine before slipping under the duvet and hoping for sweet dreams about a certain green eyed blonde, sports car driving...accountant.

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~ Conflict Of Interests ~

by Weebod

RATED NC17: Sexual content and mild profanity

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

Part Two:

Elish parked her Mondeo as close to her office as possible. The rain was coming down hard this Monday morning, the night had been hot and muggy, offering one of the few times when air conditioning would actually be useful in this part of the world. El hoped the rain would help clear the air. Grabbing her briefcase, she opened the car door, umbrella in hand, ready for the dash into the community centre. Shaking the excess raindrops from her umbrella, she made her way through the glass doors and into the shelter of the building.

Upon her arrival El noticed that Brenda had her head buried in paperwork. Deciding not to let

any awkwardness hang between them throughout the day, she made her way up to the reception desk.

"Morning Bren."

"Ah, morning Elish." Was the slightly mumbled reply.

"About the party..." El noted that Brenda couldn't maintain any kind of eye contact with her, so decided to make this quick and painless. "I'm sorry about the...you know."

Brenda nodded, "And I'm sorry about..." Brenda was unable to complete her sentence. El watched the red blush creeping up Brenda's neck, as her eyes darted around, again wanting to settle on anything but El.

"Good. So we're...Good? Yeah?" Brenda nodded furiously. "Right...I'll see you later then?"

Again Brenda nodded, "Yeah, sure." It was painfully clear that the girl was suffering more with every second that El remained in her presence, so a quick exit was the only option left for both of them. Once inside her office El closed the door and let out a long sigh while rubbing her temples. *Damn, that didn't go as planned,* she thought.

Elish spent the next three hours in her office trying valiantly to go about her normal routine. She found herself all too frequently distracted with thoughts of the weekend and occasionally daydreaming about a certain green-eyed blonde and entertaining the idea of taking a trip to the butchers. After finding her thoughts yet again wandering towards seeing Aisling, Elish gave up her attempts to concentrate on her work and headed off to the kitchen in search of a cup of coffee. She took a moment to look out into the car park through the kitchen window. The rain was still falling heavily, but the thing that El noticed most was the lack of a silver Mercedes. Elish was slightly disturbed to realise that not seeing Aisling's car was more depressing than the miserable weather.

Elish pulled her car into the gravel driveway of her cottage. Finally the rain had stopped around two hours ago, giving way to some late afternoon sunshine. Opening her front door she set her keys on the small bureau and dropped her umbrella into the holder. Jacket hung up and briefcase set aside, she made her way to the kitchen in search of some food.

Deciding she had stalled long enough, employing the tactic in an attempt to not look too keen, El reached for her telephone to make the call to Aisling. She felt a little nervousness mixed in with the anticipation of chatting to the blonde again. As her fingers pressed the appropriate numbers on the pad, her anticipation surged.

After four rings the phone was answered at the other end by a rather posh sounding Irish woman.

"Good evening, this is the Kelly residence."

"Oh, hello, can I speak to Aisling please?"

"Aisling is in Scotland at the moment, would you like to leave a message?"

"Oh," El was momentarily speechless, but quickly regained her composure. "When will she be back?"

"We're not sure at the moment." Was the curt reply from the stranger on the other end of the line.

"Okay, thanks, I'll call back."

"Very well."

"Bye." Elish added distractedly as she set the cordless phone back on its charger. Gone were the feelings of anticipation and any hint of nervousness. Instead El was left wondering what had caused Aisling to leave the country since she had last seen the blonde. Deciding to get caught up on some of the work that she had given less than her full attention to earlier that day, El contented herself with the hope that Aisling would call her that evening instead.

It was a tired and introspective Elish that exited her car the following morning. Glancing around the car park there was still no sign of the silver Mercedes. Elish knew she was in a bit of a funk and despite her best efforts to convince herself that there would be a perfectly good reason for Aisling not contacting her, she couldn't help but feel a little miffed with the situation. Elish barely grunted a morning greeting to Brenda before she holed herself up in her office and delved into work with a bit more aggression than usual.

"Come in!" She barked, when there was a knock on the closed door. It was a sign that Elish only wished to be interrupted if it was absolutely necessary.

Naomi peeked her head round the door, before entering. "Everything alright El?" She asked tentatively. The glare she received in return gave her the answer to her question. "Does it have anything to do with the disappearance of a certain blonde?"

Elish looked at her friend sharply, "What the hell is it with you people? You have to go around meddling in everyone else's business. Can you not just mind your own once in a while?"

Naomi was taken aback with El's sharp reply, but recognised her friend was simply lashing out due to frustration. "Look El. I've obviously caught you at a bad time. I'll come back later."

"No, don't go...I'm sorry, you just hit a nerve."

"I can see that." Naomi waited patiently for her friend to say more.

"I'm being irrational. I called Aisling last night, only to find out that she's in Scotland. She knew I would be calling, so I just assumed she would call me to explain, but I haven't heard from her." Elish sighed, "I wouldn't normally be so bothered, but I really like her, you know. I don't know a lot about her, but..." El took a deep breath, "I'm very attracted to her."

Naomi knew that the time for teasing and interfering was over. When Molly had come to her requesting help to invite Aisling to the barbeque, Naomi had thought it was a good idea, unfortunately she hadn't fully taken into account the repercussions of her meddling when things didn't go as smoothly as anticipated. She really hoped that there was a perfectly good reason for Aisling's behaviour. However, she was genuinely surprised to hear El confess how much she felt for the little blonde in such a short space of time. Elish had seen her share of romances over the years, but Naomi had never known El to be so keen on someone so quickly, if at all. It was a surprise to see her friend so touchy over a missed phone call. The tall brunette was usually quite cool with relationships, taking the ups and downs in her stride. Naomi thought that this could prove to be a very interesting time for her friend.

A short while later there was another visitor to El's office. Molly felt truly awful for El, especially since she played a major part in proceedings. She had spent the last five minutes apologising to Elish for interfering. Molly, El knew would never knowingly do anything that would cause any harm or upset to another human being, but El felt the need to make a point and re-establish some boundaries.

"I appreciate what you were trying to do Molly - really, but sometimes it's best to let these things take their natural course." El paused as she gathered her thoughts. She wanted to make sure Molly understood her point, without causing the older woman further upset. "The truth is, I don't really know Aisling. This could be the norm for her, I really have no idea, but I'm hoping there is a good reason behind her lack of contact."

"Don't give up Elish. I'm sure there is a perfectly good explanation for her disappearance. I'm not often wrong about people, I think she is a good lass."

El offered Molly a weak smile. "I hope so, I really do." El paused. "I think now though, I need the time and space to deal with this my own way."

"Molly smiled. "I understand El. No more interfering, message received loud and clear."

"Go on, get back to work with you - Oh, and Molly?"

"Yes?"

"I'm going to be making an impromptu visit to one of those tea dances. I've been hearing a lot about them. Apparently some of the pensioners have been getting it on at these things. Are you running a dating service as well?"

Molly recognised the tease in El's words and was glad to hear it. It was a sure sign that all would

be well between them. "You're more than welcome at one of the dances El. And if folks happen to date at them, well I think that's an added bonus."

"It sure is Molly, but I heard that Joseph McGinty and Patrick Gourlay ended up coming to blows outside the newsagents over the affections of the widowed Mrs Martin."

Molly looked genuinely disturbed at this information. "Oh my God, Elish. That's awful."

El laughed, "Had you there Molly."

"You are terrible Elish Maloney! I don't know how your Mam ever put up with you?" Molly stormed out of the office and could still hear El's laughter when she reached the end of the hall.

That evening El chose not to work at home and instead, found herself relaxing on the sofa with a glass of wine, listening to some classical music from her favourite selections. She was roused out of her comfortable buzz by the ringing of the telephone.

"Hello?"

"Hi Gorgeous."

"Eugene! Oh my god, it's been too long!" El was positively delighted to be hearing from her old friend.

"True, but I have to make sure to give you enough time to miss me."

"Well it worked, how are you?"

"I'm fabulous and I'm home for a few days."

"Really, you're here? Can we meet up?"

"Of course, you're at the top of my list."

Elish laughed, Eugene would say that even if she were last on his list. "How's life in the big city?"

"London is great, but every so often I crave home...true it's not very often, but it happens. Spend the day with me on Saturday and I'll tell you all about it?"

"It's a date, I happen to be free Saturday." El answered readily.

"You know darling, while I'm delighted that you're free to spend time with me, it's a travesty that

such a gorgeous woman is available at such short notice to spend the day with an old queen like me."

Elish wasn't quick enough to reply and her old friend sensed turmoil immediately. Drama and gossip were Eugene's favourite past times, he could sniff it out no matter how much a person attempted to hide it.

"Ah, I suspect there is a story to tell and I want to hear the entire sordid lesbian drama in full Technicolor."

Despite her sudden dip in mood, Elish managed to laugh at Eugene's theatrics. "Its not that bad and it might not be a drama."

"I'll be the judge of that, no-one does drama quite like me."

Elish proceeded to relate the entire story of Aisling from mystery blonde with a gorgeous car, to sausage maker then accountant.

"Wow, she sounds delightful Elish, but remember, she didn't call you." He cautioned.

"I know that Eugene."

"I sense a but coming here." He guessed.

"I really like her." Silence greeted El at the other end of the line.

"Eugene?"

"Oh, sorry El, I was just picturing which hat would go best with my dress for your wedding."

"You think you are so funny."

"I try...seriously, Elish. Don't get too hung up on this woman until you are sure about her. I already don't like her for not calling you."

"That's sweet Eugene and I will try, but can we change the subject now?" El pleaded.

"Off course we can.... So. Any chance you can entice one of your brothers along for the ride?"

"Not a snowballs chance in hell. They all still chase the fairer sex."

"Ah, such a waste. Tell me darling, have you stolen any of their girlfriends lately?"

"Not since I was Fourteen Eugene and she kissed me remember?" Elish smiled at his teasing, he asked her the same question every time they got back in touch with each other. Elish had told him the story since it was all part of her coming out to her parents. Mary McGrath had been

dating her older brother Tim, for a few weeks, but it turned out she was more interested in dating his sister. This had come as quite a surprise to a young Elish, since she had a crush on Mary who was a year older than her, but never in her wildest dreams did she think that Mary would return her interest. That was until the day Mary came round and Tim wasn't home. She asked Elish if she could hang out with her until Tim came back from playing Gaelic football. It didn't occur to El at the time that Mary would have known he wasn't home. That afternoon in her bedroom El was kissed for the first time by Mary McGrath, the girl of her dreams. A week later Mary came round again when Tim was playing football and they ended up repeating the kiss from the week before, unfortunately El's mother found them sitting on El's bed kissing. It was to be a monumental moment in the life of a young Elish Maloney. She found out her Father was more wonderful than she imagined, that her Mother believed confession was the answer to every problem Elish would face and her older brother Tim could hold grudges for a very long time. The teasing from his five other brothers didn't help matters any. Elish also found out that day she really enjoyed kissing girls and intended to make it a life long hobby.

El's Mother had been extremely upset. Her staunch catholic upbringing, making her fear for her daughter's soul. El's father had smoothed the way for her; he spoke to her mother at length, allowing her to understand that El could not change her preferences. It wasn't a choice she had. If she followed her heart that was all they as parents could ask.

Her father also gave her one of the sternest lectures of her life. She would find her own girlfriends from now on. Nothing good could or would ever come out of stealing someone else's. Especially from one of her brothers.

No sooner had El hung up the phone, after arranging to pick up Eugene on Saturday, than it rang again.

"Forget something?" she teased. Eugene was always calling back immediately with some additional piece of information. He was a stickler for details.

"El?"

"Yes?"

"It's Aisling."

Silence.

"Are you there?"

"Yes, I...I didn't expect to hear from you."

"About that, I'm sorry El. This is the first chance I've had to get in touch. It's a long story. I was

called away on a family emergency."

"I called you on Monday." El stated. There was silence on the line, as neither knew what to say next. Aisling broke the silence.

"I'm sorry El, truly I am. If we could meet up when I get back, then I can explain?" If El could have seen Aisling at that moment, she would have been witness to the pain etched on her face, which may have helped her make the decision Aisling wanted her to. Unfortunately that was not the case.

"When do you get back?" El's voice remained Neutral, not cold, but Aisling could read nothing from it.

"I'm not sure, but I have to be back before Saturday. Maybe we could meet up on Saturday evening?"

"No, I have plans." She didn't intend to sound so abrupt. None the less, that's how it came across to Aisling.

"Can I call you when I get back?" She asked tentatively.

El was torn. Her heart wanted to say yes, but her pride won out. "Maybe we should just play it by ear? I'm sure we will bump into each other at some point."

It wasn't what Aisling had hoped for, but she decided given the circumstances it would have to be enough for now. "I really am sorry about the call El. I hope I see you soon...Bye."

"Bye."

El hung up the phone for the second time that evening. Her earlier good mood was gone, but she wasn't deflated. Aisling had called and wanted to see her. El went over the conversation in her head and one word stood out, *emergency*. Aisling had said it was a family emergency. Now Elish was feeling bad for not being more understanding on the telephone. Should she call back? She felt torn now. The naturally compassionate side of her character warring with the part of El that felt hurt, causing her to react in a less than cordial manner.

El's attempts to find sleep that night were interrupted with pangs of guilt. She suspected that Aisling could really do with a friend right now and instead she had given her the cold shoulder. *Damn!* El cursed herself. *How did life get so difficult all of a sudden!*

"Morning gorgeous." Eugene leaned forward to kiss El on the cheek then enfold her in a warm embrace.

"Hi handsome." El replied, burying her face into her friend's neck and inhaling his fresh scent.
"Mmm, you smell nice."

"I thought I better make an extra effort for my favourite girl."

"You scrub up nicely," Elish teased. Eugene was the vainest man she knew.

They made their way to El's Mondeo. "I have to make a quick stop at the community centre to drop in a set of keys, then I'm all yours for the day."

"Sure. I thought we could go to that nice restaurant by the waterfront in Dun Laoghaire. It's a beautiful day for it."

"Sounds perfect."

Despite El's protests Eugene insisted on accompanying her into the community centre. She quickly left the keys with the caretaker and they headed out into the sunshine, Eugene playing the gentleman to the hilt and insisting that El take his arm. To anyone who didn't know them they looked like a loving couple out for a stroll in the sunshine. Which is exactly what Aisling thought when she spotted the pair walking towards her. Elish had her head thrown back laughing at something Eugene had told her, gripping onto his arm tighter to maintain her balance. She looked into his eyes and gave him a quick peck on the lips then they continued on towards the blonde. When El saw her she pulled up short causing Eugene to glance her way questioningly. Looking from El to Aisling told him the reason for his friend's abrupt stop.

"Who's that El?" He asked discretely.

Elish moved her sunglasses onto the top of her head and took in the sight of Aisling from head to toe. Deliberately taking her time to linger. Aisling was dressed for what El assumed to be a meeting. She wore well-fitted dark trousers with a crossover white silk blouse, a pair of heeled open toed sandals completing her outfit. Her jacket was draped over one arm and a folder clasped in the other.

"Looks like a number cruncher to me." El spoke loud enough for Aisling to hear. They both shared a wan smile. Pleased to see each other, but hesitant at the same time.

"Hi."

"Hi yourself." El replied. "Aisling meet my good friend Eugene." El motioned to her friend, "Eugene meet Aisling." The pair exchanges polite greetings.

"You two off somewhere nice?" The blonde enquired politely.

"Eugene is taking me to lunch." El patted her friend's arm. "We have a lot of catching up to do."

"Sounds great. Unfortunately I'm going to be spending the afternoon in a meeting."

"No rest for the wicked huh?"

"Something like that." Aisling answered cryptically. "I, ah, better get going or I'll be late."

"Sure, see you around?"

"I hope so." Aisling replied feeling a little more encouraged.

"Nice to meet you Aisling," Eugene replied politely.

"And you...Bye El."

They made their way to El's car.

"That is the woman you believed made sausages?" Eugene was incredulous. "El, no-one who drives a car like that makes sausages!"

"I know that...now." El, glared.

"She gorgeous El."

"This I also know Eugene, but..."

"But what? El, she's interested in you, make up and go to bed with her."

"I don't want to go to bed with her Eugene."

"What?" Eugene felt El's head to check for a fever as El batted his hand away. "Are you sick? Turned straight? Something's up."

"Let me rephrase. I don't *just* want to go to bed with her. Of course, I would want that, but it's complicated." El blew out a breath, "Anyway, just the other night you were warning me off her and saying you didn't like her."

"That was before I saw her."

"Now who has a fever? You like men Eugene."

"I appreciate beauty Elish. I love flowers, but I don't want to date a plant."

"You forget I've met some of your ex boyfriends."

"Bitch!"

"Tart!"

"Dyke!"

"Poof!"

They both burst into laughter. "God, I've missed you." El stated.

"Ditto."

The smell assaulted El's nasal passages. It was rancid and made her stomach queasy. She removed her glasses and headed out to reception to find Brenda already heading her way.

"Do you smell that?"

"Yeah, I think it might be coming in from outside." Brenda replied.

By this time some other members of staff were starting to gather in reception. El rolled her eyes. No one was following the fire safety procedures that they all had been made to sign off on. It was typical.

"Brenda, look out the front door, I'll check the back."

Elish immediately spotted the source of the smell. The skip outside the back of the pub was ablaze. She called to the staff in the foyer that it was safe to remain in the building, not that they had ever left it in the first place. Then Elish made her way down towards the skip, Brenda was hot on her heels.

"Should we call the fire brigade?"

"It will have burned itself out by the time they get here." Elish replied.

"Yeah, but maybe we should still call them."

"It's okay, I've already done that." Came a familiar voice from behind them. El, turned to see Aisling standing in the back entrance to the pub, a yellow hard hat protecting her head. *Damn she looks cute!* She took a moment longer to take in Aisling's attire. A tight v-neck short-sleeved tee was worn with a knee length dark brown skirt, that had a design woven into it. Her look was finished off with a pair of tan leather flip-flops. El wondered if Aisling's toes were claustrophobic, she had never seen them enclosed. They could now hear the fire engine sirens in the distance; help would be there in minutes. Elish could feel her stomach roiling with the smell coming from the burning skip, the last thing she wanted to do was vomit in front of Aisling. By this time Naomi had made her way down to the skip as well.

"So, what's cooking?" Naomi asked.

"Rotten meat by the smell of it." El replied.

"Were you having a barbeque with your special sausages Aisling?" Naomi enquired innocently. Elish couldn't contain her laughter.

"I suppose I asked for that." Aisling said, sharing in the fun.

"Elish lunch is ready!" She turned to see Molly, at the back of the community centre. Molly was always making her lunch whenever she was around. Turning back to the group she looked from Brenda to Naomi, who both took their cue and made their way back to work.

"Would you like to join me for lunch?"

"Oh, I don't want to impose."

"You wouldn't be imposing. Will you join me?"

"I would love to."

Aisling walked alongside Elish to the community centre as the fire brigade arrived.

"You know, as cute as I think it is, you can take the hat off now." El tapped the hard hat on Aisling's head.

"Oh, I forgot!" It was the first time El could recall seeing the confident blonde blush. She removed the hard hat and ran her fingers through her mussed hair, attempting to give it some body.

Molly looked to the kitchen door to see her boss walk in with Aisling, she managed to hide her smile and immediately set about making up more sandwiches.

"I hope you don't mind another one for lunch Molly?"

"Not at all Elish, Nice to see you again, Aisling."

"And you Molly. How are the tea dances going?"

Molly shot a glance at Elish before replying. "They're going very well." El, snorted. "Ignore Elish, she's been teasing me about all the dating going on at the dances."

Aisling's eyebrows shot up at hearing that. "I take it this was an unexpected happenstance Molly?"

"Well, yes, I hadn't really taken that possibility into account when going through the plans, but it's a welcome surprise."

"Oh, it's a surprise all right. Next thing we know your tea dances will need bouncers at the door and a security detail inside." Aisling laughed.

"Oh, away with you Elish. They'll need no such thing." Molly seemed to ponder that for a moment before shaking her head. "I've got some work to catch up on, so I'll leave you two to enjoy your lunch."

El escorted Molly to the kitchen door, "Thanks for making lunch Molly." She smiled sweetly.

"Yeah, well...see you later Elish."

El sat at the table and poured herself some orange juice from the jug Molly had set out, she offered some to Aisling, who accepted. "Is it my imagination, or are your staff a little subdued?" Aisling enquired.

"Lets just say, there were a few *discussions* that took place last week. Some folks are still feeling a little fragile." El answered cryptically and Aisling chose not to enquire further.

"Mmm, these sandwiches are good."

"So I see. You have quite the appetite there Ms Keenan."

"Yeah, well, I'm a growing girl." She answered as she licked some mayonnaise from her thumb. El smiled.

"I want to explain about my disappearance Elish."

El nodded, "Go on." Now seemed as good a time as any to hear what Aisling had to say.

The blonde took a drink of her water before continuing. "I have a younger brother, he's studying law at university in Edinburgh, well at least he was." Aisling paused again, to gather her thoughts.

"If it's too difficult to talk about, I can accept that Aisling." El offered gently, as she touched her friend's hand.

"No. I mean, yes it's difficult, but I want to explain it to you, please?"

"Of course. Go ahead." This time El entwined Aisling's fingers with her own to offer some comfort.

"My brother, Aiden, is schizophrenic. He developed the illness mid way through his third year at university. He is currently an inpatient in an Edinburgh hospital. A professor there specialises in mental health problems that develop in gifted young people. It's a good place for him to be, but it's obviously quite far away from his family."

"Is there no unit here?" El asked.

"Even if there were he wouldn't come home. My parents are having a very difficult time coming to terms with the collapse of their perfect family. Three years ago they had two children destined to have good careers that they expected to marry suitable partners and provide them with grandchildren. Then they find out that I'm a lesbian, that was two years ago and now their son has mental health problems. They keep wondering where they went wrong with us. It's been an especially difficult time these last six months since my brothers diagnosis."

"That's a very tough situation for everyone involved. Perhaps with time, your parents will be able to cope better with your sexuality and your brothers illness."

"I hope so. Right now I'm all he's got. He doesn't want to see them, because their negativity is detrimental to his wellbeing. I fly over once a month to visit with him. He told my parents not to visit until they could accept him for who he is now."

"And they can't do that yet?" El enquired.

"No, I've talked to them about it. It's like they have just put him out of their mind. They're not ready to deal with the reality of the situation. As far as their friends are concerned Aiden is still at university studying. The truth is he will probably not complete his studies."

"You said it was an emergency that had you going to Edinburgh?" El prompted.

"Yes, I got a phone call from Aiden. He had a weekend pass from the unit and had decided not to return. He called me late Sunday night; he was in a highly anxious and confused state. He had been drinking and wasn't making too much sense. I left immediately for the airport. I took a flight to London, because it was the first one available, and then took the shuttle to Edinburgh. I just prayed that I would find him or he would call again and tell me where he was. It took me almost 36 hours to find him. There are so many bars in that city and I think I covered at least half of them."

"Where was he?"

"He booked into a hotel. My parents might not be ready to see him, but they have no problems throwing money at him. He called me three more times, the third time I managed to get a rough location from him and by then I knew he was in a hotel, so I found him quickly after that."

El stood up and walked around the table to enfold Aisling in a comforting hug. "You must have gone through hell in those hours before you found him. I'm so sorry."

"He's my brother El. I would do anything for him."

"He's very lucky to have you."

"I'm lucky to have him. When my parents found out I was gay, they were very angry. Aiden was a constant source of support to me. Everything I'm doing for him, I know he would do for me and more."

"You're a very special woman Aisling."

"I don't know about that Elish, I'm just doing what any loving sister would."

El, knew differently, but chose to maintain her silence. She was sorry she ever doubted this strong woman in her arms. Hearing today what she had been through, the lengths she had gone to, to assist her brother only served to increase El's attraction, and desire to get to know Aisling better.

"I was wondering?"

"What?" Was the muffled reply from El's shoulder.

"Would you still like to go out to dinner with me?"

Aisling smiled into the fabric of El's shirt. "I would love to."

Finally, El thought to herself. We are going to have a proper date. She was sitting in the bar of an independent cinema and Aisling was due to arrive any minute. They had both expressed an interest in a New Zealand film showing at this place, now El was sitting with the tickets waiting for Aisling. She glanced towards the bar door as the blonde arrived; both smiling as soon as their eyes met. As usual Aisling looked good. Low waist boot cut jeans and a purple v-neck t-shirt, El glanced to the blonde's feet and sure enough, yet another pair of flip-flops. Casual, but sexy, a look Aisling seemed to pull off with ease. Considering her own attire briefly, El wasn't much for dressing up outside of work. Her Levi's had to be at least ten years old, the faded look and soft feel of the denim testament to the many times El had worn and washed this pair. Her brown belt was probably older. The long sleeved kaki tee and suede fawn trainers were fairly new. El's first consideration was always comfort before fashion, she suspected that Aisling loved clothes and fashion was more of a lure for her.

"Hi."

"Hi yourself. We have twenty minutes before the film starts, would you like a drink?"

"Sure, I'd love a water thanks."

"With or without bubbles?" El enquired.

Aisling smiled, "Without if possible, but I'm not too fussy."

"Okay, be right back." El headed off to the bar to order their drinks, thinking things were looking better by the minute, behind her Aisling had her eyes glued to El's backside wondering if she had ever seen a butt look so good in denim.

"Now that film came close to crossing so many lines." Elish proclaimed as they made their way out of the cinema.

"Yes, it certainly didn't gloss anything over...what did you think of the ending?" Aisling enquired thoughtfully.

"Hmm, it didn't wrap things up in a neat little package, but I suppose that in itself makes the ending more realistic. Life rarely offers a neatly packaged ending."

Aisling looked at El, recognising a kindred spirit. "I hear you..."

They walked to the car park, both deep in thought; the film had a very bleak and at times dark storyline, which had left both women feeling introspective. El thought maybe a change of scenery would lift their spirits.

"Would you like to go to Florentine's? They do great cakes and coffee, anything you want."

"Oh, I haven't been there in ages!" Aisling exclaimed. "Do they still serve hot chocolate in those enormous cups?"

"Yes."

"With a flake and whipped cream?"

El laughed, "Yes."

"I'm there."

They spent almost two hours at the café getting to know each other better, sharing bites of their cakes and funny stories. Neither woman wanted the evening to end, but they both had work the following day, so it was with great reluctance that El settled the bill and offered to walk Aisling to her car.

"Well, I had a fantastic evening. I would love to do it again sometime."

"So, would I, but next time I pay." El smiled, it had been a moment of brief debate between them, El won out stating that she was the one to invite Aisling on a date, so she got to pay."

"It's a deal, next time you can pay." El conceded.

"How about Saturday? Can I take you to dinner?"

El nodded, "That would be nice."

"I'll pick you up around seven?"

"Looking forward to it already."

They had arrived at Aisling's car, their date was almost over and they were experiencing their first moment of awkwardness that evening."

"Well, I'll no doubt see you around, this week."

"Count on it," Aisling replied.

Elish desperately wanted to kiss Aisling, but they were on a main street and she wasn't sure how the blonde would react to a public display of affection. She bent hesitantly to place a kiss on her lips and was surprised in a most pleasant way when the blonde seized control of the moment and pulled Elish in for a lingering toe curling kiss. Elish remembered enjoying the kisses they had shared at the barbeque, but this was so much better, probably because she hadn't had any alcohol to dull the senses El thought. The kiss seemed to take on a life of its own and the only thing that brought it to a halt was the sound of cheering from nearby. A small group of guys had spotted them and decided to encourage them to go further.

They broke apart, Aisling giggling at the antics of their spectators.

"I think it's time to call a halt to these proceedings or we're going to have to start charging that lot." El motioned to the grumbling men behind her.

"I had a great time, goodnight El." Aisling got into her car and Elish watched her drive off down the road. She turned to head back to her own car when she caught one of the men staring at her. "What?" she asked.

"I was just wondering, how do I get myself a woman like her, or you?" He enquired cheekily.

"Oh, that's easy," El, replied. "Just become a lesbian." She walked towards her car with a smile on her face as she heard his friend's laughter follow her.

The next day El had an unexpected, yet very welcome visitor to her office.

"Morning Aisling. This is a pleasant surprise."

"Morning El, I wondered if you might be able to help me out?"

"Sure, if I can." El couldn't stop the flirty tone that crept into her voice.

"Next week I'm going to be having the painters in and..." Aisling was stopped mid sentence as she watched the water El had sipped spray out of her mouth.

El coughed, "I'm sorry, go on."

Aisling looked sceptically at her. The woman was acting very strangely. "As I said, the painters will be painting my office. I didn't find out until this morning, they've kind of sprung it on me. It means I'm looking for a base to work from, do you have anywhere in the community centre I could use? Or perhaps Naomi has somewhere?"

"What will you need to do your work?"

"Fax, photocopier, occasional internet access. That should be all I need."

"You can share my office while they paint yours."

"Are you sure El? I don't want to impose."

"It's no trouble really. You can work from here. I mean how long does it take to paint an office?"

"They said it would be a few days. That's to paint it, lay a new carpet and put the new furniture in."

"Okay, that's no problem. So you will be here from Monday till your office is ready?"

"I really appreciate this El."

"Glad I can help." El smiled.

"Did I just see a gorgeous blonde leave your office Elish? Should I be jealous?" Naomi affected a pout.

"Yes and yes." El smirked at her friend's antics. "Bye the way, I could cheerfully kill you."

"Me? Why?"

"That expression you use when you have your period." El stated.

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Aisling just used it innocently, but I didn't know that at first and sprayed water everywhere. She must have thought I was having a fit or something!"

Naomi laughed until there were tears in her eyes, "Oh boy. I wish I had seen that." She attempted to get the conversation back on track. "So what did she want, apart from you that is?"

"If you must know, Aisling was looking for some office space while she 'has the painters in', but her office really is being painted."

Naomi chuckled again, "We have a spare office at the moment, she's welcome to use that."

"Eh, yeah. She won't be needing it." El answered while feigning interest in some paperwork.

"I didn't realise you had a spare office here El."

"We don't, she's sharing mine."

"Really? You hate to share your space." She pointed out.

"Things change."

"Obviously." Naomi paused, absorbing this new information. "So you two getting on well then?" Her implied innuendo wasn't lost on El.

"A lady never tells Naomi." She teased.

"Uhuh, and what's your excuse?"

"You think you're so funny." El mocked.

"Okay, I can see I'm not going to get anything from you...unlike a certain blonde I could mention."

"It's only office space Naomi." She answered nonchalantly.

"No El, it's your office space, there is a big difference. Have fun my friend." She winked and left.

El put the papers she hadn't been reading back onto the desk in front of her. Why had she been so keen to share her office with Aisling? Naomi was right, she hated to share her workspace, not wanting any distractions and as few interruptions as possible. There was no doubting that Aisling

would be one major distraction. The two of them sharing El's small office was sure to disrupt her routine - but El knew the truth was she had offered her space to Aisling because she wanted to spend more time with the cute, confident blonde. El was already looking forward to next week, but she had Saturday nights date to enjoy first.

El was tucking into her potatoes with gusto. She loved the way her Mam did them. Even if there were no other reason to be here, she would come along for the potatoes alone. The dinner table was quiet the only sound being the clatter or scrape of cutlery on china.

"How many dates have you been on with this new girl Elish?" El raised her eyes to meet those of her Mam's, a mirror of her own pale blue. *Somebody's been talking*, she thought to herself. She looked at her brothers seated around the table, she knew they were listening, but none were paying her any attention.

El swallowed her food before replying, "Two Mam."

"Did you take her somewhere nice?" Honestly, El thought, since her Da's passing nearly five years ago her Mam had taken on his role of ensuring Elish treated women properly with relish. No wonder she could only have uncomplicated sex in a foreign country!

"Yes Mam. I took her to see a film, and then we went to Florentine's. Last night she took me out to dinner at a new French Bistro, the food was lovely, as was the company."

El's mind drifted back to the evening before. The stunning black dress Aisling had worn, showing a hint of cleavage and a teasing length of thigh where it split. The expensive jewellery and the intoxicating smell of her perfume, providing a heady concoction, which had driven El, mad for most of the evening. When Aisling had dropped her off later that night it was all El could do not to drag the woman into her cottage and ravish her. They had spent a good few minutes kissing passionately in the car. Both knowing what would happen if they ventured inside the cottage. El recalled how Aisling's breasts had felt against her palms, the feel of the satin material that provided a barrier and their weight as she cupped them. When her hand wandered to the inside of Aisling's thighs beginning to tease the soft creamy flesh there, they both knew they had to stop. Reluctantly they disentangled themselves from one another. Elish was left with no option but to take care of herself that night. Her overheated and highly aroused flesh would have made sleep impossible otherwise.

El's Mam looked at her sternly. "I thought you said two dates? That's three by my counting." El looked puzzled so her Mother continued, "She was at your barbeque was she not?"

"Yes, but how...never mind." There were a few sniggers from around the table. Obviously someone had been talking a lot.

"Right boys, you know the rules - you stay away from El's woman. She is officially off limits."

El liked the sound of that, her woman, she smiled at the image.

There was a chorus of "Yes Mam." From around the table, before they all tucked back into their dinner, except Tim, who had more to say.

"Mam, it occurs to me that the off limits rule doesn't really apply to El's women. Seems to me that it's much more likely that El would end up dating a woman after us, than we would an ex girlfriend of hers."

El bristled at this, was he still holding a grudge? She was about to tell him to get over it when her Mam interrupted.

"How do you mean Tim?"

"I'm just saying, her ex girlfriends are all lesbians. None of them are interested in us, but some of the women we date are interested in El." There were a few nods and murmurs of agreement from around the table. El decided it was time to torture her brothers.

"Noreen Jackson and Mary Cahill." She stated, and then looked pointedly at the twins Danny and Thomas. It was fun to watch their faces as they began to realise exactly what she was saying.

"Aww, God. No. That's just sick!" Danny protested. El shrugged, "What can I say? If the women stayed off limits after me, there wouldn't be any left for you lot."

"Alright Elish, that's enough of that kind of talk at the dinner table. And Danny...do not take the Lords name in vain."

"Sorry Mam."

"Elish, bring your new girl to dinner soon." Mrs Maloney instructed.

"Aww, Mam."

"Soon Elish."

"Yes Mam," El mumbled. She sighed and offered a silent apology to Aisling for what she would be subjected to in the near future.

It had been two hours since Aisling had arrived in El's office and El was regretting her impulsive decision. She had left herself wide open to the most exquisite form of torture, Aisling had just left the office to use the bathroom and El picked up a folder to fan herself. *Stay focussed. Stay professional. We both have work to do.* This was about to become her new mantra in the coming days. If this was how she felt after two hours she had no chance of lasting a few days in the

presence of Aisling. It had all started just minutes after the blonde arrived. Aisling was bending down to get something from her bag on the floor and gave Elish a wonderful view of her black lacy bra; El hadn't been able to focus since. *Did she have to wear a low cut top? Does she have to look so damn sexy in everything?*

Aisling returned to find El buried in work, she wished she were able to concentrate as well as her dark haired friend. Unfortunately she was finding her all too distracting. Sighing, she attempted to focus on what she was doing.

"Do you have any scrap paper Elish?"

"On the shelf above the printer." El pointed.

Aisling reached up for the paper and inadvertently gave El a flash of the back of her black thong. That was it for El; she stood up from her chair, removing her glasses running her fingers through her long hair. "I'm going to make some coffee, would you like a cup?"

"Oh, sure. That would be nice."

"Milk? Sugar?"

"Just some milk, thanks."

Elish walked to the kitchen glad to be away from temptation though only because she had to keep her hands to herself while at work. She grabbed two mugs and looked towards the coffee pot, noticing it was still half full. *Typical*, she thought. *Usually the pot is almost empty. Today I want to waste some time here and for once there is enough coffee in the pot!* El emptied the dark liquid into the sink and removed the coffee from the fridge, putting a new filter in place, she spooned the coffee into it. Taking a seat at the kitchen table while she waited for the coffee, Elish lamented the lack of work she would get through during her normal working hours, knowing she would be working from home the next few nights. Still, she found it hard to regret her decision to offer the use of her office to Aisling. It was the sweetest form of torture after all. She poured the dark liquid into the mugs, and then added milk to Aisling's. Taking a deep breath she headed back to her office, this was going to be one hell of a day.

At three o'clock Aisling informed Elish that she was finished for the day.

"Oh, right." El removed her glasses to look at Aisling properly. "I forgot you wouldn't be here the entire day."

"I'll see you tomorrow, El. Once again, thanks for letting me share your office. I'll check on the painters in the morning to see how things are coming along."

El smiled at Aisling, "Honestly, there's no rush."

"I know, but I have to chase them up anyway, boss's orders." Elish had practically forgotten that

Aisling's father was the owner of all the buildings around them. Now that the accountant was leaving for the day, she wanted some physical connection with the blonde after denying herself that for the last six hours. El stood up intent on intercepting Aisling before she left.

"I know this isn't really the time or the place and I'm breaking my own rules, but I would really like to kiss you before you leave."

El's answer came in the form of a sweet parting kiss from Aisling, it was brief, but very enjoyable. Both of them fully aware that anything more would be inappropriate. El decided the kiss alone was definitely worth sharing her office for.

Relieved to find that she was a little more relaxed in Aisling's company the next day. El spent most of her time surreptitiously observing the blonde. Noticing her quirks, some of which she found very endearing, others quite funny. Aisling was like a daemon when she got to work on her large calculator. Her fingers were a blur as they tapped out the numbers on the pad. What El found to be so cute was that she tapped her foot in time with her typing. She wondered if Aisling was aware she had that habit. When the blonde stopped using the calculator she would immediately search the desk for a pen, this made El smile, as the pen was behind her ear. It was very amusing to watch and El was finding it hard not to laugh every time she witnessed the same behaviour pattern. Elish had one major complaint though, Aisling was messy. Her paperwork was spread out over every available surface. In comparison, El liked to keep her workspace tidy. The accountant assured El that she knew what every piece of paper was for, where it was and would tidy it up at the end of each day.

Aisling turned her head and caught El watching her. "What?"

"You're left handed." El remarked.

"Really?" she teased.

"I hadn't noticed that before." El removed her glasses and as was her habit put one of the arms into the corner of her mouth. Aisling's eyes slid down to El's mouth, then she ducked her head and mumbled something El couldn't make out.

"What was that?"

"I said I wish you wouldn't do that?"

El was puzzled. "Do what?"

"Put your glasses in your mouth. It's distracting."

El frowned and looked at the glasses in question. "I'm sorry, I'll try not to distract you, I wasn't aware that I was doing it."

Aisling could tell El wasn't aware of exactly why it was distracting. "It's a habit you have when

you remove your glasses. It's really sexy El."

"Oh... Oh!" El smiled as realisation dawned on her. "Well I'm not the only one with distracting behaviour." Aisling's eyebrows rose up upon hearing this piece of information. "Oh?"

"I keep getting little peeks of your underwear."

"Peeks?"

"Yesterday you were wearing a black thong and matching bra. Today you have on a peach thong and matching bra."

"Nude."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The shade is nude, not peach."

El swallowed the lump that suddenly appeared in her dry throat.

"What shade are yours? It's only fair I get to know."

"Wh..." El cleared her throat. "White, cotton."

"A woman who likes her staples."

"Ah, I'm late for a meeting." And with that Elish fled her office, leaving behind a very bemused blonde.

A very flustered Elish burst into Naomi's office. "Hi Stud, what's up?"

"I needed to escape for a little while." Naomi raised her eyebrows.

"I would have thought only an emergency could have pried you from that office at the moment."

"Yeah well. I didn't anticipate just how difficult it would be to spend so much time with her and not be able to touch her. It's driving me crazy."

"You do look a little flushed."

"It's not funny." El moaned.

Naomi left to get El a cold bottle of water. "There you go Stud, that should cool you off."

"You're taking too much pleasure from all of this."

"Oh, come on Elish. You would be exactly the same if the roles were reversed. I've never seen you like this. I think it's fantastic."

El grunted her reply and continued to drink her water. *Fantastic my arse!*

The following day was glorious. El had dressed in a light cotton blouse with linen trousers. It was going to be a scorcher, not a good day to be stuck in an office with no air conditioning. She greeted Brenda who was outside smoking her pre work cigarette.

"Nice day for it."

"Groan, it's gonna be murder today El."

"I know." She could just imagine how some of Bren's day would go. Disgruntled members of the public made more irritable than usual due to the heat. *Ah, never mind, it won't last forever.* El told herself. They never got enough sunshine; she just wished that it would make an appearance on weekends.

Upon entering the office Elish knew her day was going to be tough and not because of the heat. Aisling had dressed to keep cool. A tight spaghetti strapped top and light cotton skirt was finished off with yet another pair of flip-flops. *She must have shares in some flip flop company,* Elish mused. *Urgh, this is torture!*

Good morning El, lovely day isn't it?"

"Marvellous." El replied, trying valiantly to keep the sarcasm from her voice. "Did you sleep well?"

"Oh, like a baby."

"Lucky for some," she grumbled.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing, I just didn't sleep too well."

They both fell into the rhythm of their work routines, occasionally stealing glances at each other. The day progressed that way, leaving El feeling more in control, as the situation became more tolerable.

"Elish!" El's ears perked up at the sound of her name being called. She got up from her seat and

headed towards where she thought Aisling was.

"Elish, the bloody photocopier is jammed!"

She entered the small utility room to find Aisling with her head stuck inside the photocopier attempting to see the problem. She banged on the side a couple of times, frustrated when nothing happened after pressing a flashing button.

"Anything I can do to help Ms Keenan."

"I hope so, it's your equipment." Aisling answered sharply.

El's eyebrows shot up her forehead, she had never seen the confident woman so wound up.

"Please stand aside while I check *my* equipment, which I am so graciously allowing you to use." Aisling stood to the side and crossed her arms over her chest, an almost petulant look on her beautiful face. El fiddled a bit with the trays, less than a minute later she turned to Aisling, a triumphant look on her face. "There all sorted, a simple paper jam." She smiled.

Aisling stood in front of her and said nothing. Instead her eyes trailed from El's, down to her mouth, and then dropped to linger on her breasts before looking back up into El's amused features.

"Enjoy the tour?"

Aisling was unrepentant. "Very much so." She held eye contact with El, until the tall woman turned and left the small room.

The day continued on in that vein. They found themselves becoming more tactile with each other. Their caresses as they brushed past one another becoming more bold as the day wore on. At one point Aisling was turned away from Elish, standing in front of the window. El took the opportunity to have a really good look at the blonde's rear. When her eyes drifted back up, she found Aisling's grin reflected at her in the glass. Elish simply shrugged unapologetically, they had moved well beyond the point of attempting to hide their appreciation of the other's form, and instead their perusal had become as overt as their touches.

Elish was between a rock and a hard place, as much as she was enjoying her time with Aisling the pain of not being able to do exactly what she wanted was becoming so unbearable, she was about to explode. She finally cracked when after returning from a trip to the bathroom, she collided with Aisling at the office door, the blonde had been on her way out. They bounced off each other with the impact, and then instinctively grabbed the other to steady them. Elish had a hold of Aisling's upper arms, while the blonde had a hold of El's waistband. El ushered them quickly into the office and closed the door, her lips immediately finding her partner's. Aisling groaned at the first contact between them, as desperate for the kiss as Elish. For a few moments they both forgot where they were, giving themselves over fully to the feeling of being with the other, when a hand started to stray inside her shirt and towards her breast, El

grasped it lightly. "We can't. Not here."

Aisling let out a sigh of sheer frustration in response to El's gentle reprimand.

"Come home with me, please?" El groaned as their mouths met hungrily yet again.

"Yes." Aisling kissed El again. "Soon El, I can't take much more of this."

"I'll be there in an hour."

"I'll be there too."

El arrived at her cottage fifty minutes later. Taking a deep breath, before opening her front door, noticing how her hand shook slightly as she slotted her key into the lock. Putting her briefcase down near the bureau she ran her fingers through her hair. *Damn what am I doing?* She asked herself, she had no time to make any preparations, no time for second thoughts. Aisling would be here in minutes and they both knew exactly why. *Don't think Elish just do. You want this woman and she wants you in return.* So why did she feel so nervous? Looking out her front window El saw the familiar silver car pull up. Aisling got out and locked her door, then made her way up the path to El's front door. It opened before she could knock.

"Come in, I only just got here myself." Elish was clearly nervous. Aisling decided that there was no time left for talking. She closed the door and stepped up to her tall companion, resting her palm lightly on El's cheek she reached up to capture the lips that she had been bewitched by for most of that day. Elish pulled her closer as she groaned into the blonde's mouth, her tongue seeking entry into the hot interior. Tongues met and moved together softly, caressing then retreating. Aisling was determined to pick up right where they left off, her hands seeking out the buttons of El's shirt, undoing them with skilful fingers. El's hands moved to the blonde's buttocks pulling her tightly against her and massaging the firm globes. The shirt now unbuttoned, Aisling slid the garment from her partner's shoulders, letting it drop on the bottom step of the stairs. Her tongue trailed down from El's mouth to the long column of neck, where the blonde assaulted the skin there with kisses and a gentle sucking on her pulse point. This made Elish squeeze tighter and Aisling's skirt rode up as El moved her thigh between the blondes legs, running her hands up the back of smooth thighs to once again rest on the firm globes of flesh she was so fond of. Their hips began instinctively thrusting against each other; Elish shuddered under the physical onslaught.

"Oh, yes." She could feel Aisling's hands at the waistband of her trousers, undoing the button and pulling down the zip. Moving the fabric over her hips the trousers pooled at El's feet, leaving her clad only in her pants and bra. She reached for the hem of Aisling's tight white top, deciding the blonde was still wearing too much clothing; Aisling lifted her arms to assist in its removal. Elish paused a moment as she let the garment fall to the floor. Her eyes finding those of her soon to be lovers, this was the first time Elish had felt in control in days. With steady sure hands she

reached under the blonde's skirt and pushed her panties down, Aisling lifted one bare foot to assist with their removal, then locked her leg around El's waist, offering everything she had. El worked her hand between the blonde's legs, caressing her inner thighs before moving to circle the hard nub she found there. Aisling's hips thrust forward in an attempt to get El's fingers exactly where she wanted them. Elish didn't even consider teasing her and swiftly buried two of her long fingers inside Aisling, quickly setting up a rhythm. El could feel her own legs tremble with arousal, putting thoughts of her needs on hold; she concentrated on the beautiful woman moving powerfully against her.

"Oh God yes. Harder Elish!"

El matched Aisling's thrusts and all too quickly she felt the familiar signs of orgasm. El was amazed by the blonde's physical response to her; she hadn't even brought her thumb into play. El stilled her fingers within Aisling and left them nestled there. The blonde's head lay on her shoulder, face partly buried in her neck, her breathing ragged. El's hand played gently with the back of the blonde's short hair, wanting to soothe and relax her lover. Aisling whimpered when El removed her fingers from their nesting place. The tall woman offered soothing words and light kisses to the still frazzled woman.

"Do you think you can make it upstairs?" El asked gently. Aisling smiled and nodded her reply. "C'mon, lets go." Shoes and most of their clothing left discarded at the bottom of El's staircase the pair made their way upstairs to continue what had started earlier that day.

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~ Conflict Of Interests ~

by Weebod

RATED NC17: Sexual content and mild profanity

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

Part Three:

Elish looked down at the blonde head resting on her stomach, her fingers moving lazily through the golden locks. She glanced briefly out the bedroom window, it was almost dark and El guessed the time to be somewhere around 10pm.

"Elish?" Came the quiet voice from somewhere around her navel.

"Hmm?"

"When did you come out to your parents?" El, chuckled in response to the question. "Oh, this is sure to be good," Aisling, guessed.

"You might say that. I was fourteen, my Mam caught me in my room kissing my brothers girlfriend." Aisling started laughing, El could feel her shaking against her stomach. "I shouldn't be surprised really, but that's one hell of a coming out story Elish."

"Yeah, I suppose it is." El mused. "I was given such a lecture though."

"Your parents weren't happy about you being gay?" Thoughtful green eyes peered up at El.

"Well, my Mam wasn't for sure. But I got the lecture from my Da, because I was kissing my brothers girlfriend. He was more concerned about that, than my newfound sexuality. He smoothed the way for me with my Mam." It would have been hard to miss the adoration the brunette felt for her father.

"He sounds like a great guy?"

"He was." Elish whispered into the dark.

Aisling easily picked up on the hurt in her lover's voice. "You want to talk about it?" she enquired gently.

"Maybe some other time, okay?"

"Of course."

Uncomfortable with the direction the conversation had taken, Elish deftly steered the focus back to Aisling. "What about you? When did you come out?" She playfully ruffled the blonde locks.

"Hmm, I told my parents out of sheer desperation. They were driving me mad with their constant hints about who was suitable and available to date. It got to the stage of them actually inviting young men to dinner whenever I was home from University. It all came to a head when I brought my then girlfriend home to spend some time with me. There we were sitting at dinner with some young Doctor, who was the son of friends of my parents, I decided then that I had to put an end to it. The following day I sat my parents down and explained to them that Karen was my girlfriend and I had been dating women for the last two years. It went down like a lead balloon. Karen and I booked into a hotel for the next few days till things settled down a bit. Karen then headed back to London early and I went back home only to endure countless lectures on how much I had disappointed them. They were continually asking where they had gone wrong. Telling me I would soon see sense and realise how much of a mistake I was making. It was relentless. My brother Aiden became my rock through it all, telling me it made no difference to

him. He would love me regardless. Thank God, I'm not sure how I would have handled having my entire family disgusted with me."

If Aisling had lifted her head to look at Elish, she would have witnessed the frown marring the brunette's features. El's own experience having been so different, it was hard to imagine how tough that must have been for the blonde. Elish moved her hand through the soft locks in a soothing motion, trying to relax the woman sharing her bed.

"Why do you continue to live at home? I mean, they don't agree with your lifestyle, it must make things difficult."

El could feel Aisling nod her head against her stomach. "I finished university in June this year. It was already agreed that I would start working for my father when I got my degree. I have a flat in London that my father bought when I went there to study, just as my brother has one in Edinburgh. I'm going to sell it and purchase a property here. I've already looked at a few. I think I would quite like to concentrate my efforts on finding somewhere now. I seem to have found a very enticing reason to hurry that project along." Aisling lifted her head from El's stomach to offer her a breathtaking smile. Not one to miss out on an opportunity the brunette moved in to kiss the lips she had been enjoying at length for most of the evening.

"Good morning."

"It is isn't it?" Elish moved in for a kiss, which quickly became more. "God, I just can't get enough of you." The brunette's voice was husky from sleep and the early stirrings of desire.

"Feelings mutual." Aisling replied as she rolled El onto her back, a move made easier with El's compliance. They began to grind against each other slowly. Elish bent her long leg at the knee to offer Aisling more purchase, which the blonde used with abandon. Sliding easily along the length of El's smooth thigh while the brunette cupped her buttocks to assist. El could feel Aisling's climax getting closer as the blonde move more urgently above her. Concentrating fully on Aisling's pleasure, Elish wasn't prepared for the fingers that snaked between her thighs to help bring her over the edge with the blonde.

They both lay sated and spent, catching their breath in the early morning sunlight. El moved her hand in lazy circles over the sweat slicked flesh of her partner's lower back, she could feel her own skin sticking to the cotton sheet beneath her.

"Wow." Was all the blonde could manage at that moment, her face burrowed into the taller woman's neck.

"Yeah," El agreed. "Wow." They lay in silence for a few minutes, recovering from their early morning exertions, until Elish broke the spell, her conscience getting the better of her.

"Much though I don't want to, I have to get up and ready for work." El gently kissed her lover, before moving Aisling from on top of her body. Taking a deep cleansing breath she swung her long legs over the edge of the bed to contemplate making her way to the shower. One look over her shoulder at Aisling with her tousled blonde hair and her body lying naked on the scattered sheets almost changed El's mind. Sensing her hesitation the blonde smiled enticingly. "You are a dangerous woman Aisling Keenan." Elish declared. Having to use every ounce of willpower she possessed to get off the bed and into the shower.

While Elish showered Aisling took the opportunity to locate her clothing. Looking around the bedroom and seeing only her bra and skirt she assumed everything else would be at the bottom of the staircase.

Elish walked back into the room clad in a bathrobe, her dark hair still wet. She found Aisling sitting on the bed fully dressed in yesterday's clothes. Her own clothing that had been discarded at the bottom of the stairs folded neatly nearby.

"Don't you want to shower before you leave?" El enquired politely.

"No, I don't have any clean clothes, so I'm going to drive home to shower. Thanks for the offer."

"I'll see you at the centre later then?"

Aisling shook her head. "I'm going to work from home today, I know for certain that if I work from your office, I'm not going to get much done and neither will you if I get my way." The blonde's tone left no doubt in El's mind that she was serious.

El laughed. "I agree, I wouldn't get much work done either."

"Can I call you later?" The query was tentative despite the passion they had shared over the last few hours.

"I would like that."

Monday morning found Elish sitting in her office. After a quiet weekend she was looking forward to the days ahead. El glanced at her watch, *any minute now*. A smile came to her face unbidden as she imagined the mayhem that was about to ensue.

BRRRRRRINNNNNNG!

The shrill constant ring was both deafening and nerve jangling. The tall brunette calmly reached for her bag and strolled out to the designated area. As she stood there taking in her surroundings she glanced over and caught the eye of Naomi, they shared a conspiratorial wink as they

observed the mayhem around them. El watched on as her staff exited the building, some in a panic, others unsure whether they should bother. She took a mental note of all that was happening, taking especially careful notice of those staff members that had not yet exited the building and the sheer stupidity of the ones that had, only to decide they needed to return back inside a potentially dangerous building to retrieve something. *Oh, this is going to be fun.*

A full twenty minutes later, which was the amount of time that had passed before everyone had exited the building, Elish addressed her staff. "That, ladies and gentlemen, was a fire drill. Which I might add you have just failed...miserably!" She made direct eye contact with Adam, who had been the very last person to saunter from the centre. She wasn't surprised as he was late for everything. People were always cracking the usual jokes about him being late for his own funeral. El thought it would be ironic if the building were ablaze he could have turned up early for his cremation.

"Everyone gather in the main hall in five minutes, and I do mean five minutes! Not ten!" She walked off leaving her staff looking stunned.

Five minutes later everyone was seated in the hall. "Listen up people, the paper you found on your seat is a copy of the fire safety procedures that you are to follow in the event of the fire alarm going off. You will take the list home and learn them. I have set up the TV and Video recorder so you can all spend the next thirty minutes watching a fire safety video. Next week you will sit a written test and everyone better pass it, those that don't will have to sit through this entire video again and again until they do." There were a few grumbles, but El continued, "I'm not finished yet." She paused for effect. "If one person fails the next fire drill, everyone will be doing this again! Enjoy the video." Elish smiled and left her staff to watch.

Walking into her office feeling quite content with herself, El answered the ringing telephone.

"Having fun Stud?"

"Oh, you bet I am, we got them good Naomi." They shared a laugh. El had plotted this day since the fiasco of the skip fire. Every time their staff became blasé about something their bosses would take great delight in planning the most devious and fun ways to keep them on their toes. Those two together could be very wicked.

Later that afternoon El made her way over to Aisling's new office. The refurbishments seemed to be coming along nicely, at least Aisling no longer had to walk through the butchers shop to get to her office. El used the newly reopened staircase to get to the first floor. She knocked on the open door. "Anybody home?" Peering inside El noticed Aisling on the phone the blonde smiled and waved her in. Hanging up the phone, the accountant pinned Elish with a look. "I hear you are upsetting your staff?"

"Ha! That'll teach them to get too complacent. If I hear any complaints I'll just think up more ways to persecute them. Tell me who's been complaining, I'll make their punishment worse." Elish sounded suspiciously cheerful at the prospect.

"You're enjoying this." Aisling accused.

"Off course I am, helps brighten up the more boring days." El grinned insanely at Aisling.

"Are you having many...boring days?" The accountant asked innocently.

"Things have certainly been a lot more sedate over there since you got your office fixed."

Aisling walked into El's personal space, "You want me to liven it up for you?"

The brunette swallowed hard, "I've reprimanded members of my staff for making out on the premises. I wouldn't be setting a very good example if I were to do the same."

"You lost control once before...might happen again?" The blonde husked into El's ear.

"Not today it won't." Elish squirmed away from the wandering hands of the blonde and stood at the door, "I brought you a gift, for your new office." The brunette thrust a plant into Aisling's dangerous digits. She thought it would at least keep them occupied for a couple of minutes.

"It's lovely Elish." The blonde replied, pleasantly surprised by the woman's thoughtfulness.

El shrugged, "It's just a plant."

The blonde put the plant onto her desk so she could hug and kiss the stoic woman. "It's not just a plant Elish, it's a gift from you and it means a lot to me. Coffee?" The accountant asked to break El's discomfort, she wasn't sure what had the tall woman so uncomfortable about a gift, but she seemed to be.

"Sure, that would be great," El answered, keen to change the subject.

Taking a seat in the chair across from Aisling's desk Elish glanced around while the blonde was making coffee. She liked the new look of the office and wondered idly how much input Aisling had in the decoration. The accountant looked over at Elish, the tall woman still seemed a little nervous, she wondered if El was having second thoughts about them, she hoped not. They hadn't seen each other over the weekend as Aisling had stuck to her normal schedule to visit her brother, despite her frantic unscheduled trip a couple of weeks before.

"Did you enjoy your weekend with Aiden?"

"I did, thanks for asking. We went out to dinner, then to see a film. Stayed out of the bars." Aisling offered wryly.

"He's doing better then?"

"He seems to be more settled. Generally he feels that he lacks control over his life. Every so

often he rebels when that feeling becomes too much for Aiden to bear any longer."

Elish nodded, she certainly didn't fully understand all the implications of living with schizophrenia, but she could comprehend to a degree the loss of control. "Does Aiden stop taking his medication at this time?"

Aisling shook her head, "No, he can't do that. He is currently taking his medication by depot injections. He gets the injection once every six weeks; it's like a slow release into the bloodstream. It's not ideal, but Aiden's compliance to orally medicate was less than successful. As soon as he felt well, he stopped taking the antipsychotic because he hates the involuntary movements they cause him, then the symptoms return."

Elish was puzzled, she had never heard of most of what Aisling was telling her. She decided to do a little reading to help her understand better. As she continued to fidget, Aisling had finally had enough.

"El is there something on your mind?" The blonde's voice held a note of concern.

Elish blew out a breath, "Yes, yes there is." She paused, before continuing, which only served to make Aisling frown. "My Mam has asked me to invite you to Sunday lunch."

"Okay." Was the immediate, relieved reply.

"What? You'll go? Just like that?"

"Sure, it's only lunch after all." The blonde replied casually.

El put her head in her hands, "No Aisling, it's not only lunch. You will be meeting my Mam and my brothers."

"Really Elish, I'm fine with it. I would love to go to lunch."

"This Sunday then?"

"I don't have a better offer."

El nodded, she just wasn't sure about this, but her Mam wanted to meet Aisling so she would comply. Having spent the weekend mooning over Aisling, Elish was anxious to spend more time with the blonde. "You want to get together and do something tonight?"

"What did you have in mind?"

Several images popped into El's head, all of which she chose not to disclose, but would certainly love to be doing later. Aisling smiled saucily as if having read El's mind, she backhanded her gently in the stomach. "What if I were to drive over to yours this evening with a bottle of wine and we see what happens from there?"

El cleared her throat gently, "Sounds good."

Elish walked back over to the community centre with a new bounce in her step, she had a date with Aisling this evening life was good. Walking up to the reception desk, she noticed Brenda over at one of the filing cabinets. "Afternoon Bren!" Elish proclaimed loudly while banging her palm on the counter just to make sure she got the girls attention. "Any calls for me while I was out?"

Brenda glared at her boss, she didn't do exuberant, especially when it came to Elish, it made her suspicious of what other surprises her boss could be planning. Bren was still pissed off with El for not telling her about the fire drill earlier.

"No." Brenda replied flatly. Elish simply smiled sweetly and responded with a teasing, "Good," before making her way to her office.

El answered the cottage door with a question. "Have you eaten?"

"Yes, sorry. I didn't know..." Aisling's reply was cut short as the brunette's lips captured her own in a fierce kiss. Getting over her initial surprise, the blonde was soon responding in kind. She was aware of Elish moving them both towards the sitting room, of the bottle of wine being removed from her grasp and set down on the coffee table. Then she was being lowered onto the generously sized sofa, quickly followed by almost six foot of horny brunette. Elish seemed to be extremely single minded in her pursuit of Aisling and the blonde wasn't of a mind to stop her. The urgency of their movements increased the more wrapped up in each other they became. Clothing was hastily opened and pushed aside as they both sought out the other with focussed determination. Elish grunted as she struggled to push the blonde's jeans down past her hips. By some silent agreement they both assisted the other in this task. Only partly undressed they moved together in a tangled mass of arms and legs, constrained by the clothing they still wore. El braced herself on the arm of the sofa, hovering over Aisling and offering the blonde access to her swollen clitoris. Her other hand was already moving inside Aisling's underwear. The long fingers quickly finding the blonde's bundle of nerves began stroking purposefully, the blonde responding in kind. The brunette was soon coming hard and tried desperately to continue concentrating on her partner. She lost the battle briefly, but quickly picked up where she left off.

Elish looked on in fascination, as Aisling's orgasm seemed to continue on and on. Not wanting to stop, she stroked the blonde harder and faster and brought her to another two orgasms, before Aisling trapped the fingers between her strong thighs. Elish stopped moving, as the blonde released a long groan, then flopped boneless onto the sofa. Her thighs continued to twitch occasionally, as her breathing evened out, releasing small whimpers and soft moans. Then all was still, except the movement of the blonde's chest as she breathed deeply. Elish was at a loss, as to what to do next. She gently removed her hand from between the blonde's legs. Pulling her

underwear and trousers over her hips, she fastened the buttons of her jeans. Quietly, lifting the bottle of wine from the coffee table, Elish made her way to the kitchen. She opened the bottle with a corkscrew and retrieved two glasses. Gently sitting back down on the sofa, she poured the wine and waited on the blonde to wake up.

Sipping on her wine, Elish watched the little blonde open her eyes. She gave Aisling a stunning smile, which was returned in kind until the blonde seemed to remember something.

"Oops." She made a face, "I fell asleep, didn't I?"

"Only for about," El made a show of looking at the clock, "twenty minutes."

"What did I miss?"

"Oh not much. I opened the wine, poured us each a glass then watched you sleep."

Aisling sat up and rearranged her clothing. "Great. I'm feeling really thirsty." The blonde grinned at her lover as she reached for her glass.

"Has that happened before?"

"What? Me falling asleep?"

"No..."

The blonde laughed. "Sorry, I couldn't resist teasing."

"Brat."

"Oh, you mean my multiple orgasms." She grinned unrepentantly. "It has happened before, many times." El's face seemed to drop a little at hearing this. "But...I'm usually on my own." The brunette's eyebrow rose with interest. "I can give myself multiple orgasms, but it's rare to hit more than two in a row with someone else. I presume it's because I know exactly how to touch myself, it's easy for me to accomplish it."

"How many?"

"On my own?"

"Tonight." El clarified, sure she was being teased again.

Aisling grinned, "Four." Then she added, "So far." And noted that El looked pretty pleased with herself.

The taller woman stretched out on the sofa alongside her lover, their wine glasses just a short reach away on the coffee table. The blonde took the opportunity to rest her head on the brunette's

chest.

"I'm glad you had eaten, I don't think I could have kept my hands away from you long enough to have cooked."

Aisling chuckled, "I believe you." They lay quietly absorbing each other's warmth until the blonde broke the silence, "You know El, if I'm going to meet all your family on Sunday you should at least help prepare me a little."

"I suppose it's only fair...what do you want to know?"

"Hmm, names and professions would be a good start."

The brunette nodded, "Alright, let's see. First there is my Mam. Marie Maloney, housewife and Mother. She is very active in the church and the lives of her children." El added wryly. "My Mam hasn't had a paid job since her first pregnancy, she was too busy looking after all us kids to find the time for work as well. Prior to having the twins, she was a Home Economics teacher."

"I can imagine, seven kids!"

Elish laughed, "We were a handful alright.... Okay lets see, first born were the old twins, Gerry and Gheordan..."

"Why do you call them the old twins?"

"Cause there is another set, the young twins."

"Oh, I see."

"Right, Gerry and Gheordan are builders, they have their own company. Then comes John, he's a, well John is a law unto himself. I'm not sure exactly what he does, he seems to have his fingers in a lot of pies and is always vague about exactly what he's up to."

Aisling nodded and repeated the information, in an attempt to retain it.

"After John is Tim, he is a mechanic, has his own garage. The family vehicles alone are enough to keep him in business. After Tim would be me," El smiled. "Finally, the young twins, Danny and Thomas. Danny is a plumber and Thomas is a joiner."

Aisling laughed. "You should have been an electrician Elish."

"I get that a lot. However, Gheordan is also an electrician as well as a builder, so no need."

"Must be great having all those brothers with trades."

"Well you would think so, and they have helped me out from time to time, but in reality their

jobs keep them pretty busy so getting them to start, then finish a job off can be tricky. They refuse to take my money despite my protests, so it doesn't make any difference if I offer to pay them to finish the job. Danny and Thomas insisted they would fit my new bathroom and they have done a fantastic job. Problem was they came along almost did it in one day, but then I had to wait another week for them to come finish of the small stuff, like the grouting of the tiles. I had to drive to my Mam's for a shower every morning!"

Aisling laughed. "I can see where there might be drawbacks."

Elish was beginning to feel amorous and leaned in for a kiss, but Aisling still had questions. She moved to the side just as El's lips were about to hit their target.

"What ages?"

Sighing and pulling back, Elish paused to think about that. "Old twins are 36, John is 33, I think. Let's see, Tim is 30; I know that for sure because I was at his party earlier this year. I'm 27 and the young twins are 25."

"Married? Kids?" El looked exasperated. "Last questions, I promise."

"Okay, the old twins are married. Gerry has three kids, two girls and a boy and Gheordan has four kids, three boys and a girl. Now everyone else is unmarried, however, John has two kids, much to my Mam's displeasure at his antics, but she loves them just the same. He has a girl by his first wife and a boy to a woman he hardly knew. The rest of us have no kids, as far as I'm aware anyway."

"Nine nieces and nephews?"

"Yes, please don't ask me to name them. I could, but I'd rather not." El gave the blonde a pleading look.

She seemed to consider it, then relented. "Alright, questions over...for now." Aisling added impishly.

"Good, cause I was hoping we could move this party somewhere more comfortable."

"Really? Whatever did you have in mind Ms Maloney?"

"Me, you and my queen size bed."

"Hmm, let me think." Aisling teased just for a moment before adding, "I'm all yours."

Elish took Aisling's hand and led her slowly upstairs. Their hurried love making upon Aisling's arrival having taken the edge of their raw passion, they now seemed more intent on taking things slowly for the rest of the night.

Naomi looked up from the file she was updating to watch Elish bound into her office and flop down in an empty chair. She took in the smile etched onto her friend's relaxed face. Her eyes narrowed with suspicion, followed by a knowing smile.

"You and Aisling are having hot sex aren't you?"

"Like I'm going to confirm that." El scoffed.

"You don't have to, it's written all over you stud."

El rolled her eyes, trying to throw Naomi off the scent. "You on for tomorrow?"

Her friend frowned. "Ah, I don't know about this Elish. She'll have a fit."

"You're not getting out of it now, Ms Campbell. You promised." El reminded her.

"I was drunk!"

El shrugged her shoulders, "So?"

"Oh, Eeeee." Naomi groaned.

"It's gonna be fun. I promise."

"Hmmpf."

"I knew you would see sense, I'll be here at one, we can take my car."

"No, I'm driving." Naomi sounded very adamant so El relented easily but she did wonder if it was her car or her driving Naomi had a problem with.

"Sure, whatever. Just be ready for one."

"You owe me Elish!" She declared vehemently.

"Yeah, yeah. See you tomorrow." She laughed easily at the glare her friend sent her way, as she stood to head back to the community centre.

Back at her office, El decided to look over a new proposal from Connor Colquhoun, one of the newer community workers. He had joined them at the start of the summer after graduating. Twenty minutes later, El was close to pulling her hair out. "Jesus Christ! He can't be serious." Elish exclaimed to her empty office. Grabbing the telephone she dialled Molly's extension.

"Hello?"

"Molly, it's Elish." The older woman was used to her bosses direct approach.

"Hi El, what can I do for you?"

"Can you come down to my office?"

"Sure, I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Great, see you soon Molly."

Putting the phone down, Elish took a seat and thumbed through Connor's proposal again while she waited on the community worker.

As soon as Molly walked into the office, she was met by the whirlwind that had earlier been her laidback boss. "Have you seen this?" El held the proposal up for Molly to look at.

"It doesn't look familiar." Was the hesitant reply.

"It's from Connor."

"Oh."

"Oh indeed." El blew out a breath, as she regained some composure. "I thought we talked about this?"

"I spoke to him Elish. He must have just forgotten to show me his work first."

"Molly," Elish said in an exasperated tone. "If he had shown this to you first, what would you have done?" Before Molly could reply El continued. "You would have given this idea a complete make-over and ultimately masked the problem." El slapped Connor's proposal down onto the desk, causing Molly to jump slightly.

"I'm very concerned about him. If his last three proposals are anything to go by, I think he may have to be pulled from the field."

"Oh Elish he's a good lad, harmless."

El knew Molly would defend Connor, it was in her nature, but she had to be firm on this occasion. "He probably is Molly, but he is also a fully trained professional in a position of responsibility who is frequently in contact with the public. I have serious concerns about his ability. This stuff is just too out there."

"Oh come on Elish, how bad can it be?"

El looked at the older woman, a serious frown marring her features. "Have you actually seen any of the original proposals he brings to me?"

"Well, no..."

El opened a filing cabinet and removed some folders. She threw one onto the desk in front of Molly. "This one is a proposal to have a pensioners Olympics. It's creative I'll give him that, as I recall there is everything from a ten metre Zimmer dash to an electric buggy race. When I turned it down flat, he demanded to know what was wrong with it. I told him that no-one would give us insurance and we would probably break the world record for the most broken hips in one hour."

"Well it does sound a bit..." Molly struggle to come up with an appropriate word, so El finished for her, "Out there?"

"Perhaps a little." The older woman conceded.

"His latest proposal is a way to get the unemployed club, back into gainful employment."

"Well that does sound promising Elish." Molly was looking for positives.

"It does doesn't it, the problem lies in how he plans to do this."

Molly squirmed in her seat as she waited to hear what her wayward co-worker planned.

"He plans to turn the field at the back of the centre into an organic vegetable plot. Let's put aside the fact that we don't own the field for a moment. That could go down as a simple oversight. Look at this, there are diagrams, it's fantastic." Elish pointed to a drawing of the field including a tractor and vegetables growing. "The guy should have gone to art school, cause there is more chance of this hanging in an art gallery than getting the go ahead from me!" El was on a roll, "Let me list what is wrong with this proposal. He won't get anyone to agree to do the work. Even if by some remote chance they did where would they get a tractor? Even if I came up with the budget for raw materials what would they live on after they planted the stuff and waited for it to grow? Who is going to teach them about organic farming? It's not a simple case of planting the stuff and leaving the vegetables to grow on their own."

Molly had heard enough. "What do you want me to do Elish?"

"Keep an eye on him, just make sure he isn't doing anything crazy in his day to day work. Let me know of anything suspicious or strange. I'm going to chat to him and go over everything he is currently involved in. I know it doesn't sound great, but I need to reassure myself that he is doing a good job. I'm also going to sit in on some of his groups."

Molly knew that what Elish planned to do was right and part of her job as the boss, but she just hated the idea of it. However it seemed that there was little she could do to help Connor out of

the predicament he had put himself in. For whatever reason the young man had chosen not to seek her assistance, despite a discussion they had together after Elish last spoke to Molly and voiced her concerns. Molly's mind was made up, she would help Elish any way she could. "I'll do it El. I don't like it, but I know you're right and you have to do the tough stuff."

El smiled sadly, knowing how difficult this type of problem was for the older woman. "Thanks Molly. I'm afraid it's got to be done. Oh, and one more thing, do not under any circumstances let him attend the fundraiser on Monday. Frankly, the thought of what he might say to the prospective contributors scares me...he will probably tell them he has plans to take the after school club on a educational trip to the moon!"

"Oh Elish!" Molly scalded.

"You think I'm joking?" El raised her eyebrows and waved a third folder at Molly.

The following day Elish stood in Naomi's office, dressed in a black tuxedo.

"She is going to go nuts El!" The dark skinned woman looked slightly panicked.

"Paybacks are a bitch." El replied as she wiped some imaginary fluff from the sleeve of her jacket.

"Maybe it's a bit over the top?" She gestured at her similar attire.

"No, I don't think so, and no way are you getting out of this, teach the two of you to meddle in my business anyway."

Naomi rolled her eyes, though she had to admit, Elish looked fantastic in a tuxedo, she hoped she looked half as good. "Have you worn one of these penguin suits before Elish?"

"Nope." El replied casually.

"You just want to play dress up! You, schemer!" It suddenly twigged to Naomi that Elish was enjoying that part way too much. "So what do you call this anyway? Is this like lesbian drag?"

"Hush up and lets get moving, we don't want to be late." Naomi's laughter followed her all the way to the car park.

Naomi drove them to the town hall, they parked nearby and watched as Molly went back and forward from her car to the hall with various boxes. "Maybe we should help her Elish?"

"No need, she usually does all this, she'll just complain that we are getting in the way and besides, it would spoil her surprise."

"Suppose."

"Time to go, the oldies are starting to arrive."

"Elish!" Naomi chastised.

"What?"

"You can't call the senior citizens Oldies."

"I know that! I would never say it to their face." El was winding Naomi up as much as she could and having fun.

The pair walked side-by-side right up to the front doors of the town hall and stood either side, Naomi glanced over at her companion. "Elish! For god's sake, lose the sunglasses. You'll scare them all of!"

El smiled and put her shades in her pocket.

They started to greet the pensioners as they arrived for the tea dance; both knowing it would only be seconds now till Molly apprehended them.

Sure enough the older community worker appeared in front of them seconds later, but instead of creating a fuss she stared sternly at the suited duo. Elish had a bad feeling about this but said nothing.

"Elish," Naomi said discretely as Molly continued to eyeball them.

"Relax." El replied smiling to hide her discomfort.

Without saying a word Molly turned around and went back inside.

"I don't like this El." Naomi warned.

"Calm down will you? What can she do?"

"We're messing with her baby, women don't like that."

"Oh quit fretting you wimp." The brunette chastised.

"Oh my, don't you two look smart." It was El's neighbour, Mrs Fitzgibbon.

Elish smiled at her elderly woman. "Thank you Mrs Fitzgibbon. And might I say you are looking lovely today."

"Who's your friend Elish?"

"This is Naomi."

"What did you say?"

"Naomi."

"No matter, I liked the little blonde though." El's eyes nearly popped out of her head as she stared after her neighbour. Naomi couldn't make up her mind if she should be offended or not. They both looked at each other, slightly confused until the moment was interrupted by a familiar voice.

"What? Did you think because she was deaf she was blind as well?"

"Mam!" El squeaked in surprise. She had forgotten her mother came to the tea dances.

"Go make yourself useful Elish and stop hanging around the door like a spare part. Escort the ladies and gentlemen into the hall."

Naomi glanced at Elish, "Both of you." Mrs Maloney supplied.

"Yes, Mam."

"Off course Mrs Maloney."

The pair spent the next fifteen minutes escorting people to their seats. When the tea dance got underway Molly approached the suited duo and handed each of them a card filled with ladies names.

"What's this?" Naomi asked.

"We never have enough men at these things, since you two went to the trouble of wearing suits, you might as well make yourselves useful. If you aren't sure who someone is, just ask me. You're going to be busy for the rest of the afternoon, it will keep you both out of trouble."

With that Molly walked away leaving the pair looking stunned. Naomi was the first to regain her composure. "You so owe me big time for this Elish." The brunette wisely chose to remain silent. She studied the card in front of her and counted ten names. She winced; *Naomi is going to kill me.*

At the end of the tea dance Molly glanced across at a table where Naomi and Elish were sitting, they both looked dazed and dishevelled. She wandered over to the pair with a wicked glint in her eyes. "What's wrong girls?" She asked sweetly.

"I was groped!" Exclaimed Naomi her eyes wide. "Old Mrs Laverty groped my backside ...with both hands!"

Molly winked at Naomi, "That would be *Ms* Laverty." She watched amusedly as the penny dropped. She turned to look at her boss, who was glaring back at her.

"I have drool all over my breasts, Mrs McNamara fell asleep on me."

"And that's different how?" Molly asked with a straight face, then turned and left the pair.

Elish turned to look at her friend; seeking clarification that Molly had just said what she thought she said. The look on her dark skinned friend's face confirmed it, as Naomi threw her head back, laughing heartily. "I swear it has been worth everything just for that!" She was beating her hands on the tabletop.

As they left the building Molly politely thanked them for helping out, adding. "Oh, by the way, I've had many requests to bring you back next week?"

A firm "No way!" was her answer.

Molly laughed. "Serves you both right thinking you can just waltz in here and fit in. There is a lot more to this than meets the eye you know."

"Clearly," El said and Naomi nodded her agreement.

Naomi hadn't spoken to Elish since they got in the car. "Tell me you didn't have fun?" Her friend continued to pout. "Come on, admit it. It was a laugh."

The ebony skinned woman rolled her eyes. "Oh, okay - it was entertaining." She finally conceded.

"Told you."

"Where did you get the suits?" Naomi wanted to change the subject.

"The dress hire place in the village."

"What are you going to do about the drool?"

"I have to have them dry cleaned, it was the only way I could get them for free."

"About that, how do you manage to get so much stuff for free anyway?"

"Oh, the usual way, tell them it's for a good cause. Guilt them into it." El grinned.

"I always wondered what your secret was." Naomi pulled into the car park, having to use a space further away from the centre. They both exited the car and began walking towards the community centre.

"One more thing Ms MacPherson, or is it K.D Lang today?" Naomi snickered at her own joke.

El shot her a poisonous look before answering drolly. "Yes Ms Campbell?"

"You...need some dancing lessons."

"Me!" El scoffed. "I saw a little old lady limp back to her chair after dancing with you."

"She uses a walking stick!"

"You mean she does now."

And so they continued until they parted company at the centre doors. Unbeknownst to Elish she was followed all the way by a pair of avid green eyes.

Back in her office El grabbed the suit cover, which was hanging on the back of her office door. She was just about to remove her jacket when a knock at the door stopped her movement. Opening the door she found a very welcome sight, she smiled at Aisling, but received no acknowledgement in return. The blonde's eyes seemed to be burning holes into El with their intensity and her nostrils were slightly flared. El didn't like the look of this. She backed away from the door, intent on putting a bit of space between herself and what appeared to be a highly aroused Aisling.

Closing the door behind her, the blonde stepped into the office and allowed her eyes to once more sweep the length of the brunette's body. Moving slowly but surely closer to her target, Aisling uttered her first words. "Do you have *any* idea how hot you look in that suit?" It was almost a growl.

El stood rooted to the spot as the blonde continued her stealthy approach, in truth there was nowhere for her to go, she was cornered. Aisling ran her hand up the inside of El's leg and didn't stop until she cupped her mound. Elish jumped back and released a girly yelp as a result of the brazen manoeuvre.

The blonde seemed to snap out of her trance at the sound of El's yelp. "Sorry." She stated, though it was clear she wasn't sorry at all. "I just needed to see how far you had taken the dress up."

Quickly realising what Aisling was referring to, El's interest was suddenly peaked. "So, what if I had taken it further?" she asked cryptically. Her reply was a non-verbal lick of the blonde's lips, accompanied by yet another smouldering look. "Good to know." Was El's quietly spoken reply. She tucked all thoughts of future possibilities away for a more appropriate time. "Would you like to get together this weekend?"

"Actually I was going to ask if you would like to go walking on Saturday. I could make us some lunch and I know some really good walks that we could try?"

Elish was intrigued, walking wasn't something she did much. "That sounds good. Ah, I was thinking maybe you could stay over at mine on Saturday night, then I could drive you to my Mam's for Sunday lunch?"

"Looking forward to it."

Elish saw the silver Mercedes pull up at the bottom of her drive, Opening the front door she watched her blonde lover exit the open topped car. Though well into august the weather was holding up for them. It was a perfect day for a walk and a picnic. Seeing Elish making her way down the path, Aisling chose to wait at her car. Leaning back against the passenger door, arms folded across her chest in a relaxed pose. She took in the vision walking towards her. The brunette had chosen to wear khaki shorts, showing of her long legs, much to Aisling appreciation. A simple white t-shirt and running shoes completed her outfit. A small rucksack swung casually over one shoulder.

Elish approached the blonde with a smile on her face, allowing her eyes to wander over the compact body leaning casually against the car. She stopped abruptly, a frown replacing her relaxed smile. Aisling who had been enjoying El's approach was initially confused, then soon began to squirm uncomfortably when Elish continued to stare at her feet. Unable to take the awkwardness any longer she spoke. "What?"

The brunette was snapped out of her reverie by the sound of Aisling's voice. Her eyes rose back up to meet the blonde's. "I'm sorry, I've just never seen your toes covered up before." El pointed to Aisling's feet, which were sporting a pair of hiking boots.

"What?" Aisling was confused.

"Your feet," El gestured again to the body parts in question, "I've never seen you wearing enclosed footwear. I was beginning to think your toes were claustrophobic."

Aisling giggled, "You're crazy."

Elish shrugged and smiled as she moved forward to give the blonde a kiss. "Good morning."

"Mmm, it sure is."

"So where are you taking me?"

"It's a surprise."

El looked again at Aisling's sturdy, but worn hiking boots, then glanced at her running shoes. "Are these okay?"

Aisling followed El's line of sight. "Sure, we won't be doing any hiking, just walking."

"Your boots look as though they have been over the course a few times. Something you want to share?" El enquired curiously.

Aisling pursed her lips as she pondered her answer. "Your running shoes look suspiciously well chosen. Not a brand selected by a novice. Something you care to share?" The blonde teased back.

"I might take them out for a run now and then." Was the casual reply.

"How often is now and then?" Aisling was making a show of studying El's toned calves and lean thighs, a tell tale sign of a distance runner.

"Most mornings."

"Uhuh."

"And what about this walking, or is it hiking, that you do?" El gestured to the blonde's sturdy thighs and muscled calves.

"Most weekends."

"Anything else?" El added suspiciously.

"A little work in the gym."

"Ha! I knew it."

"How?" The blonde enquired.

"Easy, you don't get the type of abdominal definition you have by walking up hills."

Aisling made a face and El laughed at her antics as they got into the car.

They were travelling towards the motorway when El asked how long the journey would take.

"About an hour."

"What am I going to do for an hour?" El was full of energy, having forgone her morning run.

"Relax, look at the scenery..." Aisling's voice trailed off until she said under her breath, "Take your clothes off."

She glanced over to her tall companion, who had tied her hair back to keep the wind from blowing it everywhere. She noticed El was undoing her shorts. "What are you doing?"

"Just what you asked." El replied innocently.

"You heard that?" Aisling's comment hadn't been meant for El's ears.

Elish grinned, "What do you think?"

"Okay, I was kidding, you can stop now." The blonde requested in a panicked tone.

"Oh, I don't know, it was just getting interesting."

"Elish, people will see!" Aisling was gesturing to the cars around them with one hand while trying to keep her eyes on the road and not on her tall companion."

"Not at the speed you drive, they won't."

"But...I'll crash!"

"Alright, I'll pull them back up, I was just kidding." Elish said laughing at her friend's flustered state.

Aisling blew out a breath as she concentrated fully on the road again. "I can't believe you did that."

"You suggested it." Was the casual reply.

"I never thought you would actually do it. I didn't even think you would hear it!"

"I happen to have very good hearing."

"No kidding."

"Can I pick some music?"

"Yes, it might keep you out of trouble." Aisling wondered if El was usually such a restless passenger.

"For now." Elish winked at Aisling when she glanced at her.

Aisling giggled, "What has gotten into you today Elish?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps it's because I'm spending the weekend with my favourite woman."

"You have others?" The blonde asked casually, but they both knew it was a serious question.

"No, I only want you."

"Good to know. I only want you too." They exchanged warm smiles then spent the next few minutes in contemplative silence, happy to have shared a little of what they were both feeling for each other.

"Wicklow! Elish declared, as she broke the silence attempting to guess their destination. Aisling glanced briefly at her, a little smirk on her face. "Took you long enough."

"Which part?" The brunette asked."

"Not telling."

"Dunlavin."

"Nope."

"Glenealy?"

"Uh uh."

"Hmm, lets see. How about Kilpeder?"

"No."

"Enniskerry?"

"Again, no."

"Aughrim?" Elish was beginning to sound a little frustrated at this point.

"I'm afraid not." Aisling was enjoying this too much so Elish made a huffy sound and sat back in her seat with her arms crossed. The blonde continued to drive with a satisfied smirk on her face; content that Elish had currently run out of towns to guess.

A few minutes later she tried again, "Glencullen!" Aisling had a look of disbelief on her face as she glanced at El. "What exactly would we do there?"

EL shrugged, "I hear they have some nice monuments." She offered in a feeble attempt at a decent reply.

"Do you want to go look at monuments?" The blonde asked thoughtfully.

"Hell no!"

"Good, cause neither do I."

Twenty minutes later they passed through the small village of Laragh and Elish finally guessed the correct destination.

"We're going to Glendalough!"

"We have a winner." Aisling declared.

"I love this place." El added enthusiastically. "I remember coming here on a school trip to learn all about the monks. The history of the valley is fascinating. It's hard to believe it was established in the 6th century. I was so disappointed when it was time to leave. I wanted to go beyond the valley, but we ran out of time."

Aisling basked in her lover's enthusiasm, delighted that Elish was happy with her choice of location. "There's a walk that passes by the upper and lower lakes, I was thinking we might try that. The views are breathtaking."

Elish bit her lip to prevent herself from uttering a thoroughly nauseating comment about not needing the scenery to provide a breathtaking view. She was shocked that the comment had actually formed in her head. Instead she replied with a neutral, "Sounds good." as Aisling drew into the car park.

The pair had been walking for almost two hours, chatting quietly while revelling in the serene surroundings. Elish believed this had to be one of the most peaceful places on earth, just as she had on her first visit over 10 years ago. They found themselves stopping at a particularly beautiful spot, which offered an expansive view of the lower lake.

"You up for some lunch now?" Aisling enquired hopefully, this seemed like an ideal place to stop and her stomach had been growling quietly for the last few minutes.

"Sure am, all this walking and fresh air has built up an appetite."

They sat on nearby rocks and Aisling began to rummage in her backpack, producing sandwiches, fruit salad and crisps. Elish glanced suspiciously at the collection then looked back to the blonde. "Okay, give it up."

"What?" Aisling asked innocently.

"There's no way you didn't pack chocolate."

"Haven't I made a healthy lunch?"

"Yes," El drawled, "but there is no way you didn't pack chocolate." She repeated eyeing Aisling's rucksack, which the blonde seemed to be attempting to keep out of El's reach. The brunette changed the subject and casually enquired what was on the sandwiches.

"Chicken salad, ham salad, cheese salad."

"I think I'll start with chicken." Elish reached for a sandwich, but at the last second she pounced on the blonde's rucksack. Aisling yelped and attempted to get it back, but El was too quick.

"Now lets see what else is in here?"

"Give it back Elish, it's empty." It was a futile attempt on the blonde's part.

"Ha!" El declared as she found several chocolate bars. "I knew you were holding out on me. "I might share if you eat all your lunch." Elish teased.

Aisling snorted, "Well that's not going to be a problem. Do you want me to eat yours as well?" The blonde gathered up the sandwiches. El looked on wide-eyed as she realised she had been outmanoeuvred by the little blonde. "Lets see, you wanted a chicken salad sandwich. I'll trade you one, for, hmm...a snickers." Aisling waved the sandwich in front of El, knowing she would trade.

By the time lunch was finished El had traded every chocolate bar in return for the food she wanted, she did think it was unfair that two spoonfuls of fruit salad had cost her an entire mars bar. She complained and Aisling eventually agreed to share it with her. Though it was a tough call.

They sat sipping water long after lunch was finished, enjoying each other's company and the solitude of their surroundings. Elish let her eyes wander over the woman sitting close to her. Amazed at how easily they had formed a friendship and relationship. Spending time with Aisling had become El's favourite thing to do, so much so that she wondered how she could have been content before the little blonde arrived in her life. Taking in her lover's profile, Elish felt a wave of emotion pass through her, if she weren't so happy, she was sure the feeling would have frightened her. She wasn't ready to analyse or label what she felt for Aisling, convincing herself it was too early for those kinds of thoughts, even if she hadn't felt this way before. Time would tell. Elish decided to act upon her emotions, instead of verbalising them.

"Are you up for little walk?"

Aisling frowned, "You want to head back now?"

"Not quite, I think there is a spot just up into those trees that offers a spectacular view."

"You know El, I don't recall that being the case."

Elish was becoming impatient, "Trust me, come on." She practically dragged the blonde to her feet, continuing to hold her hand as they made their way into the trees.

"How can you be sure about this Elish? I thought you said you hadn't been this way before?" Aisling continued to question her as they moved deeper into the trees. The taller woman just kept leading them.

"Elish!" Aisling groaned, clearly not impressed with her friends supposed knowledge of the area.

"Here. This is the perfect spot." The brunette declared as she let her rucksack drop to the ground then reached for Aisling's.

The blonde looked out of the tree line at a very unimpressive view, she was about to turn around to tell the brunette just how unimpressed she was, when she felt two hands grasp her hips pulling her back into the strong body behind her. She gasped when she felt a soft kiss in her hair. Then warm lips began to nuzzle the smooth skin on her neck. El's lips continued to place soft delicate kisses on the blonde's skin as they journeyed towards her mouth. Aisling turned her head, anxious to feel El's lips upon hers. The brunette's hands began to wander over her body. Slipping under her T-shirt to caress her lover's stomach. She allowed her fingertips to slowly map out the plane of abdominal muscles that she had come to adore. Recalling how impressed she was upon first seeing them.

"Ah, is there something you want to tell me?" Aisling sounded a little breathless, much to the brunette's delight.

"Like what?" El asked softly; as she let her hands trail down to unzip her lover's shorts.

"Like, do you have a thing for sex outdoors?"

El chuckled as her fingers found their way inside Aisling shorts, pushing the blonde's underwear aside to dip into the copious moisture already gathered at her centre. Aisling gasped. "Just relax, I won't let anyone see you."

"Oh...I'm not...oh, yesss...worried about that...Ahh, don't stop." She hissed, managing to communicate her answer despite the pleasure El's fingers were providing to her already over stimulated clitoris.

Elish continued to move her fingers in a circular motion, while her hips thrust gently into the blonde's backside. She husked in Aisling ear without losing rhythm, "That's good to know." Her left hand massaged the blonde's breasts while her lips kissed and nipped at the smooth skin on Aisling's neck. "Mmm, you feel so good."

The blonde's hips bucked forward at the sound of El's husky voice.

"How does the view look now?" El asked cheekily as she continued to pleasure her lover.

"Spectacular." Came the breathless reply, as Aisling's hips began to buck faster against El's fingers. The Brunette held her tighter as she felt the orgasm begin to rip through her partner.

"Oh, yessss...Nghhg." It was a nothing sound that told El everything. She felt Aisling's legs go weak, she gathered the blonde tighter to her.

"I've got you," Elish whispered soothingly into Aisling's ear. The blonde's head rolled back against El's chest and half closed green eyes gazed up into El's blue.

"Don't let go, or I'll fall. I don't think I'm ready to stand yet." They both shared a chuckle at Aisling's current predicament as Elish guided them to the ground, allowing the blonde to sit and lean back against her. Elish reached down to zip and button the blonde's shorts. A gesture very much appreciated by Aisling.

"Thank-you,"

"You're welcome," El replied. "I believe in finishing what I start."

Aisling turned her head to find El's lips. "I'm very pleased to hear that." She whispered before capturing them and turning fully to pin the brunette to the ground beneath them.

"Talk about killing the mood." A frustrated Elish grumbled as Aisling guided her Mercedes back towards Dublin, laughing as she weaved her car through traffic. "I mean why would they choose to walk that way? There was no reason to." El flopped back in her seat, seemingly finished with her moan. The car was silent for a few minutes before she continued. "And they knew as well! You could see it in their eyes. The way they were looking at us."

Aisling couldn't stop laughing at her pouting partner. "I don't think that's how they knew El. I'm sure it had more to do with you scrambling to pull your shorts back up."

"Peeping Toms." El grouched.

Aisling glanced at El, her eyebrow raised in question. "You can talk."

"Touché." They laughed as they both thought back to the night of El's barbeque and the bathroom shenanigans.

The following day the pair arrived at the Maloney household a little after noon. Aisling took in the modest family home, with its well-maintained garden. The grass was cut short with lines clearly showing the trips the lawnmower had taken over it. The hedge was well trimmed and the

flowerbeds colourful, with a well-chosen array of plants on show.

"Is this where you grew up Elish?"

"Not this house. We had a bigger place when we were all kids, but we grew up in this area. After my Father died, Mam decided to sell and get something a little smaller. " Elish chuckled, my brothers still resent the fact that I always got a room to myself. We had a five bed roomed house, but that meant they all had to share with someone else.

Elish used her key to open the door and announced their arrival. "We're here Mam."

A tall lean woman exited what Aisling assumed to be the kitchen. She was wearing an apron, which she wiped her hands on while walking towards them. The blonde took in the woman before her. Mrs Maloney was a little shorter than Elish, her hair highlighted tastefully to colour the grey that would otherwise show. The eyes were unmistakable, Aisling was sure had she met this woman before knowing who she was, Elish would have sprang to mind because the eyes were identical and as with Elish, a very distinct feature.

"Mam, this is Aisling Keenan. Aisling, meet my Mam."

"Nice to meet you Aisling, I've been hearing a lot about you." The smile Mrs Maloney offered was genuine, if a little wary.

"And you, thanks for inviting me to lunch."

"You're most welcome."

"Can I help you with anything Mam?" The tall woman offered.

"No, I have it all under control. You girls go through into the sitting room, the boys will be here soon enough."

Elish led Aisling through into the sitting room, again the place was immaculate, not a speck of dust to be found. Aisling understood where Elish got her neatness bug. It was clear that Mrs Maloney was of the belief that cleanliness was next to Godliness.

The house was quickly filled with the boom of deep male voices, all laughing and joking with each other, catching up on news. Aisling witnessed the easy camaraderie they all shared, and Elish was no different, she was just one of the boys to them and that seemed to suit her fine. The siblings Aisling noticed shared some similar characteristics, such as height and dark hair. Most of the boys had brown eyes, with the exception of Tim, who had the same eyes as the other two female members of the Maloney family. If Aisling didn't know otherwise she would have thought Tim and Elish were twins. Aisling wondered where the older twins wives and children were. She asked Elish who informed her that lunch for the six of them was mandatory and optional for everyone else.

"My Mam visits through the week with Gerry and Gheordan. She has dinner and spends time with her grandchildren. She wouldn't manage to do that on a Sunday with us all here. She has just the six of us for Sunday lunch as she believes otherwise it could be months before some of us see each other." She added in a mock whisper, "Trust me, you need a very good reason not to attend."

A short while later, the blonde excused herself and went in search of Mrs Maloney. She just didn't feel comfortable sitting around chatting while the woman was alone in her kitchen preparing lunch. She walked tentatively into the kitchen, sensing this was Mrs Maloney's domain, but unable to quell the urge to offer assistance she forged ahead. She cleared her throat to avoid startling the industrious woman.

"Hi Mrs Maloney"

"Oh, Aisling, is there something you need?"

"Ah, no. I wondered if I could offer some help?" She looked around the well-organised kitchen. Everything was under control, not even a dirty surface.

Mrs Maloney smiled, "Well since you're here, I could use some help with the gravy. Could you stir while I check on the potatoes?"

"Sure." The blonde suspected that Mrs Maloney could have managed to do both tasks with her eyes closed and one hand tied behind her back, but she was relieved to be able to feel useful.

"Elish says you're an accountant?"

Aisling was relieved that Mrs Maloney had started up a conversation. "Yes, I started working for my Father when I finished university a few months ago."

"You like what you do?"

"Yes, I've always gotten a certain satisfaction from working with numbers."

Mrs Maloney nodded. "I was never able to continue my career after the birth of the first two. I just never had the time. Well seven children will do that to you," she added wryly, "but I've always believed that it was important to choose a career that you enjoy, something that can bring you a sense of accomplishment. Something rewarding."

"I can't claim to be passionate about what I do, certainly not in the way Elish is about running the community centre, but I do get a great degree of satisfaction from my job."

Aisling helped Mrs Maloney dish up her homemade soup. She called for volunteers and Danny and Thomas appeared. They automatically started picking up the plates of soup and taking them to the dining room table. Aisling was impressed with the efficiency. It was clear they had run

through this routine many times before.

Mrs Maloney picked up on her thoughts. "The boys will all take turns today helping with the food. Elish is exempt because she has a guest. I'm surprised that she has left you here this long."

Aisling laughed lightly, not missing the gentle scorn aimed at her lover. "I told her I was going to ask if you needed any help. She informed me that I would be back in under a minute."

Mrs Maloney smiled, "Elish doesn't know as much as she likes to think she does." The older woman glanced towards the kitchen door, "Ah speak of the devil. Have you finally come to see where Aisling disappeared to?"

The brunette looked cautiously at the two women. Replying to her mother, "I didn't think that she would be gone so long."

El's Mam fixed her with a *look* before moving the pair out of her kitchen. "Right girls, the soup is getting cold." Mrs Maloney removed her apron and led them to the adjacent dining room.

With everyone seated at the large table, it was clear that one place remained empty. Mrs Maloney looked at the space thoughtfully. "Did John let any of you know that he would be delayed today?" A chorus of *no's* greeted her. "Well there doesn't seem any point in letting the soup go cold. Elish would you like to say grace please." It wasn't a question, but El had been expecting the request since Aisling was her guest. Even though she was here at her Mam's insistence. Elish did as was expected of her and soon everyone was tucking into his or her lunch.

The conversation was easy, with El's brothers talking mostly of work, mutual friends, and the result of yesterday's Gaelic football game. The boys knew that certain topics were not allowed at the dinner table and for the most part they endeavoured to abide by their Mother's wishes, her respect was well earned. Aisling, always enjoyed her food regardless of the company or surroundings, and being surrounded by El's immediate family was no different. Elish watched as her brothers almost gaped in awe at the little blonde's capacity to put her food away, while El's Mother looked on approvingly. When the last of her main course was scooped up with some home made bread, she turned to Mrs Maloney to thank her for a wonderful meal.

"It was my pleasure Aisling. I'm delighted that you enjoyed the food so much and please...call me Marie." Mrs Maloney offered Aisling a warm smile to help convey her sincerity.

The blonde sensed something was off and looked around the table at Elish and her brothers. They had all stopped eating or chatting and seemed to be looking at either her or Mrs Maloney. Most seemed to be astonished, Elish looked stunned and Tim seemed to be glaring at Elish. Mrs Maloney broke the moment.

"Eat your food or help clear the dishes away." With that gentle chastisement things seemed to revert back too normal.

Elish drove them back to her place after lunch. Aisling needed to pick up her car and collect her belongings that she had left at El's cottage.

"I can't believe my Mam asked you to call her Marie." Her voice held a note of wonder.

"What was with that anyway? You and your brothers had the strangest looks on your faces."

"That's because only Gerry and Gheordan's wives have ever been given that privilege...and that was after they were married."

Aisling's eyes widened upon hearing this. Now she fully understood the sibling's reaction to their mother's request. "Goodness."

"You must have made quite an impression on her." El remarked thoughtfully.

"I was just being myself."

"Then no wonder." El offered her lover a beautiful smile to accompany her soft words.

They parked in front of the cottage and headed inside. Aisling picked up her bag and El walked her to the front door.

"I really enjoyed meeting your family El. They were all so welcoming and friendly."

"That's because they are scared of my Mam." The brunette joked.

Aisling smiled. "Really though El, I've had the most wonderful weekend."

"Me too and I wish it didn't have to end so soon. Unfortunately I have this presentation tomorrow and I really need to spend tonight going over my notes again, otherwise I won't feel fully prepared."

"It's okay, I understand, really."

"You're welcome to come to the fundraiser. It starts at 11am. I do my presentation and then members of the staff and myself chat further with prospective contributors while we have a little food and drink. We have this fundraiser every few months; it helps bring in extra resources. Every little bit helps."

"I, ah. I'm not sure if I will be able to make it, but I'll try." El noticed her companion fidget, seemingly uncomfortable at the prospect of attending.

"Not to worry, it's not like we can ask our landlord for money. Unless you would consider a rent reduction?" Elish could have sworn she saw some of the colour drain from the blonde's face. "I was kidding, honest." Elish took Aisling into her arms. "Look, I know that we haven't really talked about it and I think it's best that way. Truthfully most of the time I forget

that your father is the landlord. I've spoken to him maybe a handful of times. For some reason it's surprisingly easy for me to keep the two separate. Whatever dealings I have or will have with your father, I never associate them with you."

Aisling nodded. "I'm sorry Elish. I know you weren't serious. I'm willing to bet that you already know if there isn't any profit involved he won't be interested."

"Yeah, I kind of gathered that much. We have haggled over the rent a couple of times and let's just say, I never came out a winner."

"No surprises there." Aisling sounded flat.

"Hey, come on. I don't want to end our weekend this way." She hugged Aisling tighter to her. "I really have had a fantastic time."

"Yeah, me too."

They stood like that for many minutes, each soaking up the others warmth and comfort.

"Mmm, I could stay like this all evening." El declared as she kissed the top of Aisling's head, "but I suppose I have to go back to being responsible for a few hours. Not that I want to." She added playfully.

Aisling chuckled at her lover's words. They seemed to sum up Elish pretty well. "Since you have some serious work to do, I'll assist by leaving, because I know you won't push me out the door."

"Just one more kiss." El requested and Aisling happily obliged.

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~ Conflict Of Interests ~

by Weebod

RATED NC17: Sexual content and mild profanity

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

Part Four:

Aisling stood at the back of the hall watching her tall dark haired partner up at the front, standing talking to the many-seated guests who had gathered this late morning. Most of the guests were from local businesses, but some were from bigger business chains and multinational corporations. The object of getting them here was so they could listen to Elish give an oral presentation on what the centre did for the local community. The hope being that they would leave suitably impressed, enough to make a donation of some sort. Usually a cheque, but sometimes a business contributed something related to their line of work.

Elish walked confidently back and forth at the front of the room, her voice carrying easily throughout the hall. Wearing a well-fitted black pantsuit with a crisp white shirt open at the neck, she looked stunning. Her overall look and presentation style projected an aura of belief in the centre's contribution and good to the community, while underscoring her confidence in herself and her staff to deliver the services required, making it abundantly clear that their immediate priority was in securing funds so they could make it all possible. Pointing out how the centre's successful role in the community would enhance the prospects of the businesses, Elish was in her element. Aisling was utterly mesmerised and unduly impressed with El's fervour and commitment, her dynamic approach and natural enthusiasm meant she had these people in the palm of her hand, leaving the blonde believing that this fundraiser was going to be an unprecedented success. Aisling couldn't shake the feeling of dread she was experiencing or stop the churning of her stomach. With a heavy heart she slipped quietly from the hall and made her way back to her office.

After finishing her presentation, Elish thanked everyone for attending and invited them to remain for the finger buffet, wine and soft drinks. Afterwards members of staff mingled with the guests answering specific questions and being helpful and charming as per El's instructions. Elish was chatting with the manager of a large insurance company, unfortunately it seemed as though he were more interested in Elish than the community centre. When he invited her out for dinner to further discuss any donation his company may make, El knew she had to be firm but tactful. Accepting a date went well beyond her job description, but she still hoped to secure some funds from him, a business lunch would be acceptable.

After the insurance manager departed, admittedly with less enthusiasm than when he greeted El, she glanced around the room, hoping to catch sight of her lover. At one point during her presentation Elish had been aware of the blonde at the back of the room. That had been over an hour ago. Most of the guests had left, or were leaving and Elish said her goodbyes to the last few remaining. She had been smiling so much her jaw was starting to ache; all she wanted now was a bit of peace and quiet and some lunch.

Aisling was pouring over figures when she heard a knock at her office door, she waved the visitor in without lifting her head, afraid she would lose the place she was at.

"Hi there."

Aisling looked up in surprise. "Elish! You were wonderful!" All thoughts of figures gone, she walked over to embrace her lover.

"You think so?"

"God yes...very impressive. You had the full attention of everyone in the room."

"Not everyone." Elish said gently, Aisling knew she was referring to her early departure.

"I didn't think you would notice," she teased. "I'm sorry, but I had some urgent work to take care off."

"Hmmm, I noticed." El's emphatic reply left the blond in no doubt, that she had been well aware of her presence in the room, despite her attention being on her presentation.

"So I see." Aisling paused to study El intently. "You know, that urgent stuff is all taken care of now."

"It is?"

"Yeah, and I have to tell you Elish, watching you earlier was a big turn on."

"It was huh?" El was pretty pleased to hear this.

"Yes, very much so. You look really good too," she stepped into her lover's personal space. "And you smell wonderful." Aisling began to nibble on El's neck, eliciting a moan from the tall brunette. "I really want you right now." She husked into El's ear.

"You do?" El closed her eyes and attempted to regain her composure, which was rapidly disappearing.

"Oh, yeah, I do." To prove how much, she cupped El through her black trousers.

Elish gently grasped the blonde's wrist and attempted to pry her hand from its precarious position. "I, ah..." She was finding it difficult to form a sentence as the blonde continued her sensual assault, her hands now moving up to El's shoulders and easing her jacket down her arms. "You know my rules about fraternisation during work hours? I think this activity goes well beyond the limits." El was impressed she had managed to get that sentence out - albeit, sounding a little strained.

"I've been giving that a lot of thought after the last time you ran out of my office."

"You have?"

"Yes...I think you pulled a fast one on me."

"How?" El asked as her jacket hit the carpeted floor.

Green eyes darkened with arousal held El's blue, "This is my office Elish. I make the rules."

El swallowed just before Aisling's soft lips met her own, she knew she had lost this round to the little blonde. The tall woman found herself quickly and efficiently backed up against Aisling's desk. Aisling's hands were everywhere, in her hair, then trailing down to open more buttons on El's shirt, exposing more skin and her white cotton bra. The blonde's lips followed her hand, as she kissed her way down El's neck, lingering over her pulse point as her hands cupped and kneaded her breasts.

Elish moaned as her fingers searching for purchase, gripped the edge of the wooden desk, as Aisling continued her assault. The blonde's leg found its way between El's two longer ones and they began to thrust slowly against one another. The brunette was incredibly aroused; she could feel the dampness as it coated her cotton underwear. Elish was aware of Aisling undoing the button on her trousers then pulling the zip down. She was beyond rational thought and eagerly lifted her hips from the desk to allow the blonde to lower her trousers and white cotton briefs.

El's eyes opened at the loss of the warm body that had been so intimately pressed to her own. She looked down at a kneeling Aisling, whose eyes twinkled up at her.

"I see you still like your staples."

"Oh, yes," El husked as the blonde buried her tongue between her legs, Aisling doubted it was a reply to her cheeky remark.

The Irish Times hit the floor as Elish leaned back across the desk, scattering whatever papers were in her way. She gripped the opposite side of the desk as she opened herself offering Aisling more access to her intimate region. The blonde taking full opportunity buried her tongue inside Elish, her nose bumping her clitoris, causing El's hips to jerk forward as she released a gasp.

Elish knew she was close and one of her hands came forward to hold the blonde in place as her hips began to thrust with more urgency. When Aisling sucked harder on her swollen clitoris she came hard, collapsing back onto the desk breathing heavily as the last tremors of orgasm rippled through her.

Aisling got to her feet and leaned over Elish, moving the dark hair back from her face and gently stroking her cheek.

Catching her breath El lifted her head to look into amused green eyes. "You are so good at that," she declared, a lazy smile plastered to her face.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it." Aisling replied then asked cheekily. "So, my office is no longer off

limits?"

"I'll say it is!" Came the thunderous reply from the doorway.

Aisling's head swung round as El's shot up, both sets of eyes landing on Mr James Keenan.

"Father," The shocked blonde gasped.

"Jesus Christ," Elish muttered, as she slid of the opposite side of the desk. Turning her back to the rooms two other occupants, she began to pull up her trouser and re button her shirt.

Mr Keenan stormed towards his daughter, his face red with anger. "Is this what I pay you to do?" He demanded. "It's bad enough that we know what you're preferences are. Now I have them flaunted in my face!"

"Father, I...I didn't know you would be here today."

"Well that much is clear." He said through clenched teeth.

James Keenan looked over at Elish for the first time. His face full of disgust. "Get out." he demanded. Elish refused to move, not wanting to leave Aisling alone with her irate father. "I said, Get Out!"

El and Aisling both flinched at the volume of his voice, but Elish was not afraid of this man and had no intention of leaving just yet.

"No." Was her firmly spoken reply.

James Keenan looked at her with contempt, he was not used to being denied. "Young lady, you are on my property. If you don't leave now, I will have you forcibly removed."

Elish realised her options were limited. She glanced over at Aisling, who still looked shocked by the arrival of her father. "I'll leave if you can guarantee that you won't harm Aisling."

"I have never laid one finger on my daughter. I have no intention of starting now." He snarled.

El turned back to Aisling, "You know where I am if you need me?" At the blonde's nod she continued, "Call me as soon as you can?"

"I will." came the quiet reply.

Elish picked up her jacket from the floor; she gave Aisling's shoulder a squeeze of support, before making eye contact with her father. They both glared at each other, neither giving an inch. As El made to pass the man standing in the doorway, he left her with some parting words full of contempt.

"Goodbye, Ms Maloney." His emphasis was clear. Elish was left in doubt that this man was homophobic and she would not be welcome anywhere near his daughter, despite him already knowing Aisling was a lesbian.

Elish put on her jacket as she made her way down the stairs; reaching the bottom step she hesitated. She wanted to return to Aisling's office, her instincts kicking in. The urge to protect her lover from her father was strong. She listened intently, trying to pick up any sign that Aisling might need her. There were no raised voices, the silence felt unnatural to El, especially after the way Mr Keenan had reacted. The brunette hovered at the bottom of the stairs a few moments longer, then reluctantly made her way back over to the community centre.

She breezed through the doors intent on heading straight to her office. As she passed reception Bren looked up to get her attention, a bundle of messages in her hand.

"Boss..." she trailed off seeing Elish' raised hand stopping her.

"Later." was the short reply thrown Bren's way, as she watched her tense looking boss pull open the office door and firmly close it behind her.

El removed her jacket and hung it up. She cursed internally while moving her hands through her hair in a show of frustration. She hated feeling helpless over the situation that had arisen with Aisling's father. Urging herself to be patient she would wait for the blonde's phone call, for Elish it just couldn't come quickly enough.

A firm rap on the office door interrupted her internal dialogue. She chose to ignore whoever it was, they would take the hint and go away if they had any sense. Another knock was quickly followed by the turning of the door handle and in stepped Connor Colquhoun. Elish glared at the intrusion, but he seemed not to notice.

"I want a word with you."

El's eyes narrowed at the demand thrown her way. "It will have to wait." Was her terse reply.

"I want to know why I wasn't allowed to be present at the fundraiser?" Connor continued, seemingly oblivious to El's body language.

The brunette knew that she should insist that he reschedule another time for this chat, but her anger won out over any rational suggestion. El looked at the young man before her, he was a good-looking twenty two year old, who was utterly full of himself. El had refrained from the temptation to bring him down a peg or two, hoping he would settle as time passed. Clearly, he hadn't made any progress thus far.

"When you start submitting realistic proposals to me, then I will consider allowing your input in

other areas. While you're here, I might as well inform you that you will be working with another community worker in your groups, and you will be attending some of the groups run by other members of staff until further notice. I suggest you put this time to good use and learn from them."

Connor looked aghast at this new information. "You can't do that. I'm the most ambitious worker in the centre!"

Elish sighed. The guy could win an award for arrogance. "There is nothing wrong with being ambitious Connor, but the simple fact is your project proposals thus far have been unachievable. We are a small community centre, running on a limited budget. I need you to show me that you are capable of adapting to suit the needs of the people of this community, while working within the budget."

"I wanted to impress you. To show you what I'm capable of." Connor was now floundering, his earlier bravado and arrogance waning by the second.

"Connor, the best way for you to impress me is to do your best for this community. Not show me ideas that I can't even begin to put into action. Think more realistically and less idealistically. Then I believe you can be a great addition to the staff. I hired you because I saw in you an enthusiasm and dynamism that I believe could serve this centre well. You just need to set your goals lower for the time being. When you start to achieve success, then we will talk again."

Connor nodded and tried valiantly to hide his disappointment, but it wasn't too difficult for Elish to spot. "You need to be able to trust me to do the job."

Elish knew where Connor's biggest failing was at that moment. He was ambitious and unfortunately he was self-centred with it. He needed to realise that his job wasn't about impressing people around him, but using his skills to the betterment of the community he was working within. The one good thing Connor had going for him was his youthful rawness, it meant El had time to teach him what he needed to know. University had given him the theory with which to work, now he needed to grasp the concept of continuing his learning with the help and experience of those around him.

"That's only a small part of it Connor. The trust comes from doing a good job for the community. That's what both of us have to concentrate on. I have a responsibility for your continued education, what I need you to do is realise that the people around you have a lot of experience that you can learn and draw from. You need to take advantage of that."

Connor seemed to be genuinely thinking about what she was saying. El considered that perhaps the timing hadn't been so bad after all. If nothing else came out of it, she at least knew where Connor's problems lay, and he had managed to take her mind off Aisling for a while.

After Connor's departure El fought the urge to pick up the phone and call her lover. She picked

up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Are you free for coffee?"

"Ah, sure. You want to come here or am I coming to you?"

"Could you come here?"

"Okay, give me five minutes."

Naomi found Elish sitting in her office, coffee waiting for her. She could tell her friend was upset. The clenched jaw and tension around her eyes were giving her away. "Want to tell me what's up?" Naomi asked taking a seat opposite El.

"It's not work related."

"Okay..." Naomi remained silent, patiently waiting for El to say more.

"If I hadn't broken my own damn rules." El stated cryptically.

Naomi frowned, "Is this to do with Aisling?" At El's nod she continued, "Have you had a disagreement?"

"No nothing like that, I... Look maybe this wasn't such a good idea." El suddenly balked at the thought of explaining what she and Aisling were doing before her father arrived.

"Alright. You obviously have something on your mind, but I won't push you. If you need to talk, you know where I am." Naomi stood to leave the office.

"Wait." The confused woman sat back down.

"I allowed Aisling to seduce me in her office."

Normally Naomi would have made some comment about that, but she knew something important had occurred. She only raised her eyebrows.

"Her father came in."

Naomi's eyes widened. "While you were...? She gestured the remainder of her question.

"Pretty much, I was sprawled over the desk with my shirt open and my trousers down."

"Jesus! What did he say?"

"He was angry. He hasn't come to terms with Aisling's sexuality. He demanded I leave, I refused, and then he threatened to have me removed. It is his property."

"What do you think he will do?"

"I don't know. I'm concerned about Aisling, I hate that I had to leave her there with him. I asked her to call me as soon as she could."

"God, no wonder you're in a bit of a state El." They were both silent for a moment, before Naomi spoke again. "Do you think he will harm her?"

"He better not!" El flared instinctually at the thought then quickly brought herself back under control. "But, I don't think he will. I wouldn't leave until he guaranteed that he wouldn't lay a finger on her. Said he had never hit her."

"Well at least that's something." Naomi paused for a moment, "You know I totally forgot Aisling was the landlord's daughter."

"You and me both. For the most part I didn't think about it."

The phone interrupted their conversation as Elish almost knocked the handset over in her haste to answer. Naomi listened to El's part of the conversation.

"Hello?"

"Has he gone?"

"I'll be right over."

El hung up the phone then stood up to leave.

"Is she alright? Naomi asked.

"She seems to be, but I'm going over right now to find out for myself." With those words Elish hastily left her office.

Practically running up the stairs to the blonde's office, El immediately swept her up in a hug. "Are you sure you're alright?" El could feel the blonde head nod against her shoulder, then a muffled 'Yes.'

Elish was frantically looking her over as she took both her arms in her hands.

"I'm fine El really. It was nothing I haven't been through before."

"He didn't lay a finger on you, did he?"

Aisling shook her head, "No and he never has."

"Thank God."

"I'm really sorry El, this is all my fault. I had no idea he would be here today. He normally lets me know."

"You have nothing to apologise for. We took a risk and got caught. I'm more concerned about you. What did he say?"

"Just the usual, how he thinks I should be over this phase by now. He was less than impressed about the new use I've found for my office. Oh, and he wanted to know if you had seduced me. I told him it was quite the opposite."

"How can you be so calm about it?" El marvelled at the way her lover was able to absorb and handle the situation.

"It's not anything that I haven't heard before El, I just get on with it. He rants and raves then it's over with till the next time."

"You'll come home with me tonight?" El pulled back to look at her lover, confused by the look she received.

"I can't Elish, he requested my presence at home this evening. If I don't go he will just keep at me till I do. I would rather just get it over and done with."

The brunette didn't like the idea, but she understood Aisling's reasoning. "I would feel much better if you were with me tonight, but I understand."

"Thanks, El. Tomorrow though, I promise."

Three days later El was working late at the office, things seemed to have settled back down after the incident with Aisling's father, but it nagged at El simply because she didn't trust the man.

Rrrrrrrring Rrrrrrrring

Elish glared at the telephone. She had been trying to leave her office for the last twenty minutes. The rest of her staff were already in the pub celebrating big Rosie's birthday. El had promised to make an appearance.

"Hello?"

"Elish you are supposed to be here."

"I know, I know, Molly." Elish replied attempting to placate the irate woman. "I'll be there as soon as I can, I promise." She went on beseechingly.

"Okay El, whatever you say, but I just thought you should know that Big Rosie has challenged everyone to a drinking contest..." The woman on the other end paused awaiting El's reply.

"So?" was the slightly nonplussed response she received. Elish surmised that Rosie was always issuing challenges, and problems only arose when some gullible individual accepted.

"Nothing really...just thought you might be interested to hear that Aisling accepted." Molly chuckled when she was met with sound of a dead line.

Elish entered the smoky pub less than two minutes later. It wasn't hard to spot the group from the centre. Normally *O'Malley's* would be quiet at this time, but the twenty or more folk from the centre were occupying half the bar. Elish glanced at the two figures standing in front of a table containing pints of Guinness. Big Rosie with her unmistakable build and flaming red hair dwarfed the petite blonde next to her. Both were standing hands poised over a pint glass, every eye in the bar on the pair.

"GO!"

El watched on wide eyed as her girlfriend grabbed one of the pints and attempted to drink it faster than Rosie. She was shocked when the little blonde finished less than a second behind the big woman, neither of them having spilled a drop of beer. As their empty glasses slammed down onto the tabletop the place erupted with cheers for the Birthday girl mixed in with genuine respect for Aisling's challenge. Big Rosie gave Aisling's back a hearty thump, congratulating the blonde for running her close. Aisling then said something to the big woman before heading to the bar, which is where El intercepted her.

Sneaking up behind the blonde she whispered in her ear, "Are you leading my staff astray?"

"Elish!" She gave El a hug and quick kiss on the cheek. "No-one would take up Rosie's challenge, since it's her Birthday I thought someone should." She shrugged.

El smiled, "What was the forfeit?"

"A whiskey, I've talked Rosie into having one with me, I didn't think she would mind joining me in my forfeit." The blonde smiled lovingly at the woman before her. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Just water for me, thanks."

"Sure I can't tempt you into something stronger?"

Elish took a good look at the woman in front of her; there was no way Aisling would be fit to

drive home after the whiskey, so she decided to stay sober. "I'm sure, water will be fine."

The blonde gave a little pout before turning to place her order with the barman.

Returning from the bar water in hand, Elish found a seat next to Naomi, not surprised to find the birthday invitation had been extended to the rehab centre staff as well as her own.

"I see you're slumming it again Ms Campbell."

"It's good to mix with the riff raff now and then."

"It's so gracious of you to lower your standards once in a while."

"I see I'm not the only one who doesn't mind lowering her standards. Seems your posh girlfriend likes to rough it with the best of them." Naomi nodded to the next table over, where Aisling and Rosie appeared to be setting up for round two. Naomi watched her friend closely, looking for any reaction from her. She wasn't surprised to see El's gaze turn wistful as she took in the antics of her lover. "She's quite something isn't she?" Naomi's words whispered, intended only for El's ears.

"That she is, Naomi." Elish smiled and her face lit up.

They watched as once more Big Rosie beat Aisling by almost a second, and then the bigger woman hugged the blonde tightly to her. El was sure she could see Aisling's eyes popping out of her head with the force behind the hug.

"I think Rosie has a crush on your girlfriend."

"In more ways than one it seems." They shared a laugh at the pun. "I can't say I blame her though."

Naomi smiled, knowing El was a goner. She was delighted that someone had finally snagged her friend. She knew El was in love, but there was no way she would be the one to point it out to her. She would work it out for herself...eventually.

Since everyone had finally arrived Rosie got to open her cards and gifts, El hadn't been surprised to see the vibrator amongst the presents, but she had been a little shocked when her inebriated girlfriend had run the item up her leg and asked her, "*Can you handle that?*"

Elish, quickly gathering her wits had assured the blonde that she could, but the incident had left her wondering if she could really handle the woman handling the toy!

The longer the party wore on the more drunk most of the people around El became. The alcohol had been flowing fast and none of the revellers had eaten anything since lunchtime. When Aisling chose a song from the selection on the jukebox then offered Elish a lap dance, the brunette decided that was her cue to leave. She offered to drive her lover home, but the blonde

declined and returned a rather ribald offer of her own. Elish bundled a capricious Aisling into her Mondeo and started the drive towards her cottage.

"El, can we get pizza?" Aisling asked, her voice a little slurred.

"Sure. Is there any place you like specifically?"

The blonde waved a floppy wrist in El's direction. Elish assumed that meant Aisling had no preference at this point in time.

"Oh, maybe I could have Chinese instead?" El was about to reply, but Aisling continued, "Ahh, but I really have a craving for pepperoni."

"We could get both." El suggested. She was feeling really hungry herself.

"You would do that? You would get both for me?" Aisling sounded like a child full of wonder. It was amazing what alcohol could do to a person El mused inwardly.

She smiled at the blonde, "Off course, I know just the place to go. There's a Chinese take away and an Italian restaurant next door to each other."

"You're the best El, you know that. I've got the best girlfriend." Aisling released a sigh of contentment and flopped back in her seat, a silly grin plastered to her face.

Pizza and Chinese balancing precariously on Aisling's lap, since the blonde had insisted on putting them there Elish drove to the cottage, the smells wafting around the car making her stomach growl loudly and Aisling giggle along with them.

Over an hour later, food almost finished, Elish watched on in amazement as Aisling grabbed the last slice of pizza. She glanced at the coffee table, a small amount of rice was left in one of the containers and El knew she would struggle to find room for any of it. The chicken and black bean was all gone, along with the prawn crackers. Aisling had eaten the biggest portion of everything.

"Mmm, that was great." Ailing declared as she flopped back onto the sofa, patting her full stomach.

"Are you sure you've had enough to eat? I could do some cheese on toast," El teased, but her smirk was quickly replaced with a frown upon realising Aisling was giving her offer serious consideration.

"Gotcha!" The blonde declared, much to El's relief.

The brunette pounced on her insolent partner, tickling her mercilessly.

"Stop! God, El, stop! I'm going to pee my pants!" She screeched.

El let up, but only because she didn't want the blonde peeing on her sofa. Aisling lay sprawled across her lap gasping for breath. "Oh, no."

"What? What's wrong?"

"I feel sick now."

El groaned. This could be a long night.

The following morning Elish left her office heading towards the conference room. She had dropped Aisling off a couple of hours ago in the car park and then decided to start work early.

"I see we have all been summoned." Came the voice from behind her.

Elish turned to greet Naomi, "Looks like another rent increase." El was referring to a call she had received this morning from James Keenan, the landlord, informing El that he required the use of the conference room at 10am, and her presence was required. Elish had hastily rescheduled a meeting, knowing there would be no point in trying to reason with the man.

"Probably." Naomi mumbled. "So how did the rest of your night go?"

El chuckled, recalling some of the antics of her blonde lover. "It was good." At her friends raised eyebrow El continued. "She was drunk Naomi, it wasn't *that* good." El recalled fondly how she had held Aisling in her arms the entire night and was more than content to do so. Despite the bold proclamations the blonde had made, she was not in a fit state to make good on them, at least that night, but this morning...her thoughts drifted as she recalled the early morning wake up she had received. It seemed Aisling had suffered no ill effects after her night of excess.

Naomi cleared her throat, "If that's what not *that* good looks like, I'll take it."

El waggled her eyebrows. "I was recalling this morning, I have a new alarm clock."

The two women entered the conference room, which was already occupied by Aisling who was seated next to her father. The man was wearing his trademark smug look, which always rubbed El the wrong way. She normally could think of him as nothing more than a smug bastard, but seeing him sitting next to his daughter, her lover added a new permutation to El feelings toward him. She decided that she would try and hide her contempt for the man, instead of letting it emanate from every pore. Glancing at her lover, who offered a tight smile in return. El was

surprised at how uncomfortable the normally confident woman appeared to be. Her posture was rigid and the strain was visible around her eyes. El shrugged it off, putting it down to being in the company of her miserable bas...oops, father. El mentally berated herself, trying to think differently of this man was going to take a lot of practice.

Chancing another look at her lover, El noted the designer suit and silk blouse, probably at the insistence of her father. She knew that Aisling preferred to keep her appearance casual, with just a light dusting of make-up, but today her make-up was much more noticeable. El glanced back up into the face she had come to know so well, her eyes trapped in an intense stare, neither of them able or willing to look away. The door opened to admit two more people, breaking the intensity of the moment. Elish glanced away from Aisling to look at the man at the head of the table, his green eyes boring into hers, but where Aisling's normally conveyed warmth and a keen intellect, her fathers eyes held nothing but contempt.

The man left El's stare to look around the table. "Now that everyone is here we can finally begin this meeting." He stopped to nod at his daughter who got up from her chair to deposit some papers in front of everyone in attendance. When the blonde returned to her seat Mr Keenan continued, "If you will all turn to the first page of the document you now have before you."

Elish glanced to the official looking papers.

"I have accepted an offer from a supermarket chain to sell off the land I own here, including everything on it." The man paused to allow that information to sink in. "You are hereby served six months notice, at the end of which your lease will be over and you should vacate the premises."

There were gasps of disbelief and outrage around the table.

"Any questions?" Everyone tried to talk at once, which prompted James Keenan to raise his hand to stop them. "I'll take questions one at a time, starting on my left. He looked towards Mr Flannigan who owned the Butchers and nodded.

"Will we be able to get out of the contract before the six months are up? I'll need to look for new premises, I don't want to have to pass up an ideal offer if they won't wait." El was impressed that Mr Flannigan had the ability to think so quickly. He had asked a very astute question.

The landlord seemed to genuinely consider the question before answering. "You can buy out the remainder of your lease any time you wish."

Again the room erupted the air turning blue with the language being hurled at James Keenan. Once again order was brought to the proceedings and the questions continued.

"How long have you known about this?" This is our livelihood you bastard!"

James Keenan turned to Mr Kelly, the owner of the newsagents, "How long I have known about

this is of no concern to you. You will find that I am acting within the terms of your lease agreement. Six months notice, that was the contract you signed and that's what I'm giving you."

As the questions continued around her, El's eyes had remained on the blonde the entire time. Aisling would not meet her gaze; her head had remained bowed since her father had delivered his bombshell. El eventually moved her eyes from Aisling when her name was mentioned.

"*Ms Maloney*, do you have any questions?"

Elish looked at the smug bastard, she wanted nothing more than to leap across the table and wipe the smug look of his face with her fist, but she knew better than that. Drawing on her immense strength of will, she remained composed and dignified; she would not show this man anything less. She stood up to better make her point. "The people gathered around this table offer a very valuable service to the community. Be it the newsagent, the pub or the Butchers. Myself and staff at the centre work tirelessly to meet the needs of this community, while Mrs Connelly and her staff at the rehab centre work hard to help those in the community who have faltered and need a helping hand to deal with their addiction. You sir, have in one morning ripped out its heart and decimated all that we have worked hard to achieve over the years." El remained standing as the people around her murmured their agreement with her speech, however it seemed to have little or no effect on the man she had spoken directly to.

"So, no questions then?" was his flippant reply.

Elish could feel her body tensing as he held her gaze and she fought valiantly to remain relaxed. Raising her head she added, "No, no questions, but know this. We will not disappear. I will work twice as hard to ensure the needs of this community are met, because they sure won't get what we offer in a weekly shopping basket."

Mr Keenan gave her a condescending smile. "We all do what we have to *Ms Maloney*. I'm sure you will manage just fine."

Elish took her seat and was offered a comforting pat from her friend. Naomi felt the exact same way that Elish did. She also knew that any attempt to change his mind would be futile.

"I have no questions at this time, however once I've had time to look at all the legal documents I may get back to you."

"As you wish Mrs Connelly, though I'm certain you will find that everything is in order."

As the proceedings continued, Joseph, who ran the pub had to be restrained when informed that a new pub was being built as part of the plans for the site, but he would have no option on the lease, even though it would remain in James Keenan's ownership. A stipulation he had made upon sale of the land and buildings.

When the meeting finished, the conference room quickly emptied but the disbelief and protestations continued outside the room, soon the only two left were Aisling and Elish. The

brunette studied the woman opposite her, the fact that Aisling could not meet her eyes gave her answers, but she had to hear them for herself, she just couldn't believe it.

"Please tell me you knew nothing about that?" There was almost a hint of pleading in El's voice. She was so desperate to be wrong, her words coming out low and raspy.

Aisling lifted her head to make eye contact with Elish for the first time since the meeting had started. "Elish, I..." She trailed off, uncertain of what she could say to her lover in that moment.

"Tell me you didn't know." El demanded.

"I can't." She whispered, her eyes filling with tears.

"How could you? All that time, you knew this was going to happen." El shook her head in disbelief. "Why did you not say something sooner?"

"I couldn't say anything El. Despite everything he's my employer. I couldn't release that information to you."

The logical part of El's mind knew what Aisling was saying was true, but emotionally Elish couldn't accept that reasoning. She felt betrayed and let down by her lover. Then a thought hit her. "That's why you've been working here isn't it? Getting the accounts in order for the sale."

"Yes, that's why my father had me work here."

"So you knew from the very beginning," Elish said almost to herself.

"Please El. You have to believe me. I..."

"What? That you never meant to harm anyone? That it's just business?" Elish glared at the blonde. "Did you honestly believe when the time came, that I could just look past this and nothing between us would change?"

Aisling put her head in her hands. "It's not how this was supposed to turn out." She moaned helplessly.

"How did you see it turning out? I would just say, sure that's business and we would live happily ever after?" El was building up a head of steam, her anger beginning to take hold.

"I had hoped for a different outcome, but it seems it wasn't to be." Aisling looked devastated but Elish was beyond noticing her lover's plight.

"I think you should go." El stated firmly.

The blonde looked beseechingly at her lover, but there would be no changing El's mind.

"Please just go."

Aisling walked to the door and glanced back forlornly at El before exiting. Left alone in the conference room El finally allowed her emotions full reign. "Fuck!" she declared loudly as her fists thumped down onto the conference table.

"Fuck!" A chair flew against the far wall, the impact leaving a dent in the plaster.

"FUUUCK!!!!" El pushed the conference table hard, chairs trapping underneath, as it was propelled towards the wall, their legs screeching and squealing in protest. It stopped with a thud as the chairs scattered and fell, giving up their screams. Elish rested her palms on the table top, breathing heavily.

"Fuck," was her final painful word before exiting and leaving the room in disarray.

Naomi eased her way into El's office. The door had been closed, but she needed to see her friend and knew that knocking would just raise her hackles. She suspected none of El's staff had dared enter after hearing what happened that morning.

"It's just me," she replied quietly to El's scowl of disapproval. She watched as her friend's face softened into one of hurt. "How are you doing, Elish?" Naomi enquired softly.

El released a deep sigh while shaking her head. "I just can't take it all in, you know?"

Naomi nodded agreement as she took a seat opposite her friend. While their landlord's decision affected all of them, she was well aware of the personal impact it held for Elish. It hadn't been difficult to read between the lines as the meeting unfolded. Elish had been blindsided just like the rest of those in attendance, she knew nothing, which meant that Aisling had not mentioned anything to her lover, regarding her father's plans. She found it hard to believe that the little blonde had dated El, knowing this was coming.

"I can imagine El." They both knew that somehow they would relocate and rebuild somewhere else. It would be difficult, but they would manage and go on. However, Naomi suspected that it would not be the same for El's heart. She had to ask, "Did she know?"

The look of devastation on her friend's face told her everything. "Yes." El choked out, sounding bitter and angry.

"I'm sorry Elish." Christ, Naomi thought to herself, had the girl no sense at all? Surely she knew El wouldn't respond well to being kept in the dark about this?

"I know," El took a deep breath and glanced out the window, staring at nothing in particular. Naomi watched almost fascinated, as her friend's chin seemed to rise in defiance. El turned to

her, a look of grim determination now replacing the earlier devastation. "We go on from this. It's a setback, but we will regroup, find new premises and keep doing what we do."

"I know we will El." Naomi replied leaving the rest of her thoughts unvoiced. At what cost would all this be to Elish. She had seen her friend fall in love over the last few weeks. A situation alien to Elish, Naomi still wondered if El was even aware, or had given voice to the feeling. Now she had been betrayed by the person she loved, and Naomi wondered at what cost. That would remain the great unknown in all of this. Knowing the proud woman before her, she would not accept Aisling back into her life because she loved her. It would take so much more than that. Naomi wondered if there was even the remotest possibility of it happening. At this moment in time, she doubted it.

Elish opened her front door, relieved to finally be in the sanctuary of her own home. Propping her briefcase next to the table in the hall, she bent down to pick up her mail. Shuffling through the envelopes and leaflets, she came across a delivery card informing her the parcel was inside the wooden structure that housed her bin. El decided to fetch it and then settle for the rest of the night.

Coming back inside she began to remove the parcel tape from the plain cardboard box. Foregoing the delivery note El stuck her hand inside, pushing through the hundreds of little Styrofoam shapes used to pack the goods. Her hand met something and pulled out the harness she had ordered from an online lesbian erotic store. Elish immediately stuffed the harness back into the box, cursing as she threw it down the hall, lots of the little Styrofoam creatures escaping as the box bounced along the wooden floor. Her purchases had been made specifically for her new relationship. Elish, having decided not to use toys she had shared with other women, with Aisling. It just hadn't felt right and Elish had gone online to rectify that situation. She would put them back in the bin.

El sank onto the stairs, finally feeling the full effect of all that had transpired this day. Elbows on her knees and hands dangling between her legs, she stared aimlessly ahead. It was only when she lost all feeling in her backside, she finally moved from the step.

The following morning Elish threw herself into a familiar routine, one she had followed before Aisling entered her life. After her early morning run, followed by a shower and breakfast, Elish set about gardening and household chores, the routine things in life that she had fallen behind in of late. When the grass was cut and the flowerbeds weeded, she had taken to mending her wooden fence. In between her gardening she had frequently loaded up the washing machine and hung out the loads to dry. After dinner she ironed her clothes and cleaned the cottage from top to bottom. All throughout these activities, thoughts of Aisling crept into her head, despite her best endeavours to prevent them. It had been a vain, albeit productive attempt to stop thinking of the

blonde who had captured her heart.

Sunday El had gone to early morning Mass, then lunch at her Mam's. It had been a very subdued atmosphere, as always news travelled fast, El wasn't surprised that her Mam knew what had happened. She attempted to get El to talk about it, but Elish wasn't ready to discuss a situation she was having a great deal of trouble comprehending herself. No amount of talking would explain Aisling's decision. That would only come from the blonde herself, if and when El was ready to hear it.

The following week at work had been trying for everyone. The relaxed atmosphere of the centre had been shattered. Everyone was trying to come to terms with the shock of hearing that in six months the centre would no longer exist. At the back of everyone's mind was the fear that their jobs could go the same way, but Elish had told them in no uncertain terms that she would do everything to prevent that from happening.

Meanwhile Elish was going through her own private hell. The first morning she saw the little silver Mercedes sitting in the parking lot, it immediately cause a flutter in her stomach, which was quickly replaced with anger as she thought of Aisling's betrayal. She had also on occasion caught a glimpse of the blonde walking to her car, or one of the other buildings, El would bury her feelings and walk on, not daring to linger. She was not ready to talk to Aisling.

It was Friday morning and Elish couldn't wait for the weekend to arrive, everyone at the centre needed to get away for a couple of days. El heard raised voices outside, but it was the screaming that alerted her into action. She was off out the door without even thinking about what danger lay ahead, she just knew there was some sort of problem.

"Oh my God! He has a knife!" One of the clients from the drug rehab centre was screaming outside the front door. Elish saw no one with a knife therefore assuming the trouble was inside the drug centre she burst through the doors.

"What's going on?"

One of the drug counsellors pointed towards an interview room, "A guy in there has Theresa at knife point, and he's demanding methadone."

Elish pushed her way through the crowd of bodies watching the drama unfold and looked into the open door of the interview room. She saw a man holding a terrified looking female in a neck lock, he had a knife pointed to her throat. A few feet away Naomi was trying to talk the man out of the situation. Something in Elish snapped, she stormed back to the drug counsellor she had just spoken with.

"Give me the methadone!"

"What? Elish I Can't, rules and procedu..."

"Fuck them! Give me the methadone!"

"It's locked in the fridge."

El held her hand out. "Keys! Now!"

The drug counsellor complied immediately. Elish thrust the key into the fridge lock and easily located the bottle of methadone. Once again pushing her way through the curious spectators Elish walked right up to the knife wielding drug addict. Holding up the bottle of methadone she spoke to him calmly.

"Here is your methadone - drop the knife."

"No way!" The man was breathing harshly, his forehead beaded with sweat.

The brunette pushed the bottle towards his hand, the one that was holding Theresa tightly to him. He looked between the bottle and the tall woman offering it to him, finally his craving won out and he relinquished his grip to take the bottle from Elish. As he reached towards her for the bottle, El punched him hard in the face with her other fist, he fell backwards onto the carpet and Elish pounced on him like a cat. She was sitting on his chest, her knees pinning his arms to the floor. El was no longer thinking about her surroundings, she unscrewed the cap on the bottle of methadone and began to attempt to pour the entire contents down the throat of the addict.

"You want methadone do you? Open up! Here's your fucking methadone!" He was moving his head from side to side, trying to stop the green fluid from getting into his mouth. Elish was determined to get it in there and grabbed just above his chin, squeezing hard to open his mouth enough to get the methadone in. Theresa's attacker was spluttering and choking and Elish put her hand over his mouth to make him swallow the contents.

"Choke on it you bastard! Fucking choke on it!" El growled, watching as his eyes looked like they would pop out of his head, she was taking a perverse pleasure from the fear he was displaying now that the tables had been turned. Next thing Elish felt was a weight hitting her hard enough to knock her off the terrified stranger; she began to attempt to get to her feet when she heard Naomi screaming at her.

"Jesus Christ Elish!"

El looked up to see Naomi standing over her as two members of staff were apprehending the drug addict, it wasn't difficult after the shock El had given him.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"He had a knife at her throat Naomi!"

"Just because you have a hard on for danger does not mean you can run in here like John Wayne and do whatever the hell you want, Elish!"

"He had a knife!"

"And I had it under control, which is more than I can say for you. What the hell were you thinking Elish? You were trying to choke him to death!" Naomi was beyond furious.

"Naomi, I..."

"I can't deal with you right now, we'll talk about this later." With that the dark skinned woman stormed off to talk with the Garda who had finally arrived on the scene. Elish knew she would have to give a statement since she jumped right into the middle of the incident. Now that the adrenaline rush was wearing off she was beginning see things a little from Naomi's perspective, she knew, had the situation been reversed, she would not be pleased with Naomi breaking proper procedures to sort out a highly volatile situation.

"Elish?"

El turned to see Aisling standing behind her with an unreadable look upon on her face.

"Are you alright?" Elish bit back a sharp reply and shook her head negatively. She didn't want to have any sort of discussion at the moment. Her emotions were running high; a conversation with Aisling at this time would unravel her. She started walking towards her office in an attempt to get away from the situation she found herself in, but Aisling followed her progress all the way back to the centre. Closing the office door behind them, the blonde approached the quiet woman.

"Please Elish, don't shut me out." The brunette raised her head and looked into the eyes of the woman before her. Aisling moved forward to take the tall woman in her arms, but Elish took a step backwards to prevent any contact.

"Don't."

Elish looked so hurt as she said this to Aisling that the blonde felt her heart squeeze. She had been shocked only a few minutes earlier as she watched the woman she had come to care for a great deal take on a man holding a knife and then attempt to half throttle and half choke the living daylight out of him. She had briefly wondered if Elish would have been able to stop herself if Naomi hadn't wrestled her of him.

"If there is anything I can do Elish, anything at all let me know. Okay?"

El had finally had enough; she could no longer hold her tongue. "You want to know what you can do Aisling? Well I'll tell you. You can leave my office and don't think about coming back. I don't need you!"

Aisling stood seemingly frozen in place. She wanted Elish to say something anything, but the brunette remained silent. A knock at the door brought the blonde back to herself, she walked to the door and with one last glance back at Elish, opened it and left.

Knock! Knock!

El sighed heavily; *can't anyone take a hint around here? Bloody door is shut for a reason!* The police officer had left over an hour ago; Elish had been sat in her office icing her knuckles to keep the swelling down and generally licking her wounds. "Come in." She watched cautiously as Naomi entered her office, El flinched internally as she closed the door behind her.

"First of all, you ever pull a stunt like that again Stud and I'm going to knock you right on your arse."

"You already did," El mumbled.

Naomi sighed; this was such a difficult conversation to have. "Elish you can't go off half cocked in my building anytime you see a threatening situation. I just can't have that happening. Have you any idea the kind of procedural nightmare you have caused me? There will be a full enquiry into what happened, your involvement in part can be explained away as a spur of the moment reaction to the danger. I'm not sure what is going to happen about your attempt to choke the man with the methadone he was demanding." El attempted to speak, but Naomi put up a hand to stall her. "It seems that the only person claiming you tried to choke the guy to death is the man himself, everyone else seems to have developed temporary amnesia over that part of the incident and if they don't, it seems the Garda are having a hard time writing down the details of your attempts. You're a hero Elish. A big bloody stupid hero! You're also my friend and I love you...you big half brained idiot!" Naomi burst into tears, the events of the day catching up with her, this is where they relied on each other desperately, behind closed doors, away from their staff, they could be totally human with each other when the need called.

Elish pulled Naomi close to her, "God, I'm so sorry. I just snapped and I lost control."

Naomi nodded; she had witnessed enough to know that. "You scared the hell out of me, El. I really thought you were going to kill him."

The brunette squeezed her eyes shut tight at her friend's words, the reality of them scaring her because deep down she wondered if she had been trying to kill him. The reasons for which, she did not want to contemplate.

"He didn't kill your Da' Elish." Naomi whispered in her ear soothingly.

El felt her own tears fall, joining those of her friends. "I know Naomi, I know."

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~ Conflict Of Interests ~

by Weebod

RATED NC17: Sexual content and mild profanity

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

Part Five:

"Open up, Elish, I know you're home!"

El sighed, she had been intent on ignoring whoever was at her door, but she couldn't ignore her mother. Putting down the figures she was working on she went to let her in.

"About time, Elish." Marie Maloney gave her daughter a stern look.

"Morning, Mam. What brings you over?"

"Don't come all coy with me, Elish Maloney, I heard about the incident at work."

El lowered her head as her mother passed her heading towards the kitchen; she followed hoping and praying that her Mam hadn't heard everything. *Please let her be talking about the landlord,* El sent up a silent prayer.

In the kitchen, Marie Maloney was already filling the kettle, obviously intending to stay a while. Elish took a seat and waited for her Mam to speak what was on her mind.

"Did you go running this morning?" It wasn't the question El expected.

"Yes."

"It must be getting near that time."

"Not long now, I've been upping my mileage, if I avoid injury I should be in good shape."

"I admire your commitment, Elish. It takes a lot of discipline to do that. Twenty Six miles is a long way to run."

"It's for a worthwhile cause, Mam."

Marie Maloney smiled, "That it is. How much have you raised this year?"

"Should be a little over 5000 euros. I'm confident I can still get more sponsors before race day."

"I'm very proud of you, Elish, you know that don't you?"

El wondered where this conversation was going. It seemed her Mother had a point to make, but it wasn't like her not to take the direct route, El felt a twinge of fear in the pit of her stomach. It looked like her prayers wouldn't be answered this time.

"I know, Mam." she replied quietly.

"What you do for the community round here," she paused shaking her head, "it's wonderful, Elish." She poured the tea that had been brewing into the cups, then walked to the fridge to fetch the milk.

"I've been hearing a lot of talk, Elish, most of it about how you put your own safety aside to save some poor lass from a man with a knife. A drug addict, needing a fix." Mrs Maloney brought the cups of tea to the table and sat opposite her daughter.

El stared into the caramel coloured liquid still swirling from the stirring her mother had given it. She knew what was coming.

"Elish?" Her name was spoken so softly, El was surprised, she looked up into eyes, a mirror of her own, but where El knew her eyes reflected anguish, her mother's showed concern.

"I heard other things...things that concern me greatly. Are they true? Did you attempt to...choke the man?" Mrs Maloney struggled to say the words.

Elish couldn't lie, she swallowed hard and nodded, her head bowed, not wanting to see the disappointment in her mothers eyes.

"Oh, Elish." was her mother's whispered response. Then stronger, "You have to let this go. You can't be some avenging angel; it's not the right thing to do. You have to learn to forgive."

El looked at her Mother, her face showing all the agony and pain of their loss. "I can't forgive, Mam, I don't think I will ever be able to do that. I want to kill those bastards!" The brunettes voice cracked under the strain of the strong emotions running through her.

"No, Elish!" Her mothers voice was firm. "You cannot take the law into your own hands. That

man did not kill your father. You have to be strong and let the police do their job."

"They will never find who did it. It's been five years. Five years without justice!" El's voice was rising with her anger.

"Don't give up, Elish, it will happen." Mrs Maloney pleaded.

"When? When Mam?" Close to tears now Elish felt the weight of the last few days come crashing down upon her.

Taking her strong daughters hand in a show of support, Mrs Maloney fought back her own tears. "I don't know, Elish, but I have to believe that it will."

El understood what her Mam was telling her. By continuing to hold onto that belief, she kept herself strong, as it gave her hope. El nodded her understanding.

"About what happened, Elish..."

El interrupted, not wanting to cause her mother further pain. "Look, Mam, I..."

"No, hear me out." El nodded. "I'm proud of you, Elish, you saved that girl from harm. You are a strong brave woman, your Da' would have been proud of you, but...he would never want you to take revenge for his death, no matter how much you and your brothers want to avenge it, he wouldn't want that. He believed in the law, Elish, he was an officer all his working life and he died doing what he loved." El sniffed back tears as her Mother spoke. "Promise me, Elish?"

"It frightened me, Mam, it was like I lost all control, if Naomi hadn't been there to throw me off of him, then..." El trailed off, not wanting to finish the sentence.

"But she was, Elish, that's what matters. You didn't do it."

El wasn't so sure it was as simple as her Mam made it sound, but she would let it pass and deal with her conscience in her own time. "She was mad as hell at me."

Marie Maloney smiled a little as she sensed the slightest shift in her daughter's mood. "I'm sure she will get over it, you two have been good friends for quite some time, that doesn't just fall apart over one incident."

"You're right. Mam, Naomi has already made moves to mend any problems we might have. We're going out for dinner on Wednesday, I have to pay for being an... Well, I won't repeat what she said."

Mrs Maloney smiled again, "I'm sure I can fill in the blanks."

El chuckled, "I'm sure you can."

There was a few moments silence between them. Elish looked out of her kitchen window noting the sky had darkened, she knew within minutes it would rain and her washing was hanging out on the line. As if reading her daughters thoughts, Marie Maloney spoke, "Come on, I'll help you get it in. No point in letting it get wet."

El wondered if her Mam's mind was ever fully off household chores, or if it had just become second nature to her and she simply responded without thinking. *It's definitely a gift.* El thought to herself as they made quick work of a weeks worth of washing.

Washing in and airing on the clotheshorses that El used in the bad weather, they made their way to the living room, a second cup of tea in hand.

"How are things going with Aisling?"

El sighed deeply, "Not good."

"Speak to her, Elish, hear her out. It's such a shame that the two of you have fallen out over this sale business."

"I don't know. I'm not ready right now, I'm not sure when I will be."

"She is a lovely lass, I'm sure there is a good reason for her keeping quiet."

"She should have told me, Mam."

"What difference would it have made? You would still be in the same situation you are now."

"She let me down, Mam, I feel like she chose to support her Father over me."

"He is her employer, Elish." Mrs Maloney pointed out reasonably.

El shook her head, "I just can't understand it, all that time she knew what was going to happen and never said a word. I feel like what we had was... I don't know. I just wish she had said at the start."

"Would it have made a difference? Maybe she was afraid you wouldn't have been interested in her if you knew?"

Elish thought about that, would she have dropped her interest in Aisling had she known up front what her Father's plans were for the centre? She wasn't sure. "I don't know."

"Perhaps you should consider giving her the chance to explain?"

"I'll think about it." That was the best El could offer at this time and her mother accepted that the conversation was over.

The Maloney women hugged and said their goodbyes, but Mrs Maloney had one final request before she left. "You'll go to confession, Elish?"

"Yes, ..." Mrs Maloney was about to interrupt, but El was quick to stop her, she knew her Mam was about to suggest they go this evening. "I'll go when I'm ready, Mam. I've got a lot to think about first."

Marie Maloney nodded. "Fair enough, Elish." She left her daughters home, content for now that Elish seemed to be holding up reasonably well, despite the difficulties she was currently experiencing in her life.

Elish could hear the incessant buzzing somewhere in her sleep addled brain, it was only when the tune became familiar she realised it was the alarm on her mobile phone. Reaching blindly towards the bedside table she located it, flipped the top open and pressed in the general direction of the off button. When the polyphonic ring tone finally stopped her hand flopped back onto the duvet and Elish pried open one eye. This was becoming a new morning ritual, finding it hard to get to sleep at night Elish was finding it increasingly difficult to get up in the morning. Having been able to sleep a little longer over the weekend, this Monday morning was proving to be more of a challenge, but she needed to motivate herself.

A quick trip to the bathroom, followed by a quick check of the weather and Elish was pulling her underwear from a drawer. Pulling on bikini briefs and a sports bra, El then found a cotton T-shirt and nylon running shorts. Grabbing a pair of white sports socks, Elish sat on her bed to pull them on. Recalling yesterday how her little toe had hurt after the run, she went back into her bathroom barefoot to get her first aid kit. Micropore tape was El's answer to all friction problems, as she had begun to gradually increase her distance, she was incurring the odd problem with her feet. She needed to prevent any blisters from forming, as they could seriously hamper her progress. Tearing off a piece of Micropore, El taped over the reddish looking part of her little toe.

Walking downstairs in her socks, El opened the front door to bring in her milk from the step. She headed to the kitchen where she poured a glass of milk, then popped the bottles in the fridge. Knowing she couldn't run on an empty stomach, El had found that this small amount of fluid and a piece of fruit was enough to sustain her, without making her feel too full. Reaching into the cupboard under the stairs Elish removed her running shoes, then sat on the bottom steps to put them on. Ready to start her run El opened her front door, locked it, and put her key in its usual little hidey-hole. She felt the cool air as she began her warm up stretches, it would soon be time to warm up in her tracksuit, as summer was leaving rapidly to give way to autumn. El looked around as she went through her routine, feeling her muscles begin to ready themselves for action as they stretched and contracted. Heating quickly due to the increased blood flow to the tissue.

El glanced over to Mrs Fitzgibbon's cottage, she smiled when she spotted her milk still on the doorstep, it was rare that she left before the milk was gone, but it happened occasionally. She knew it would be taken inside before she got back from her morning run. Taking in a few deep lungful's of air, Elish set out on her easy five mile run. Having run twenty miles the day before

this would be a less challenging distance, El was approaching peak form.

Forty minutes later a decidedly warmer Elish was jogging the last hundred metres to her cottage, already starting her cool down. Walking up the path Elish began her warm down stretches, now that she had stopped running she was beginning to feel the chill in the cool morning air, tomorrow she was definitely laying out a tracksuit. She walked over to the little plant pot that housed her front door key, but her eyes were drawn over to her neighbour's step and what she saw caused her to frown. Mrs Fitzgibbon's milk was still on her front step. Foregoing the usual route, Elish put her hands on top of the fence that separated their front gardens and in one smooth motion leapt over and jogged to the front door.

Knowing her neighbour was hard of hearing Elish put her hand on the doorbell and pressed it several times. Hearing no movement inside she looked through the letterbox, calling out her neighbour's name. She knocked the door a few more times. *Come on Mrs F!* Still with no response, Elish made her way to the back of the cottage, she tried the back door and could hear Mrs Fitzgibbon's cat inside, responding to her presence. Looking through the kitchen window, what she saw shocked her into action. Lying unmoving on the kitchen floor was her neighbour. Her cat by her side.

Knowing the back door was locked, the brunette looked for a way into the cottage. With no easy access, she decided to try kicking in the back door. Mrs Fitzgibbon's door was old and two attempts later the wood split from the doorframe allowing El access.

Immediately rushing to the woman lying on the floor Elish checked for a pulse, it was there. Sighing with relief she ran to the living room and dialled an ambulance, then grabbed a blanket from the sofa. El returned to the kitchen, and put the blanket over her unconscious neighbour talking to her all the time, trying to get a response.

Elish gently cupped Mrs Fitzgibbon's cheek as he spoke close to the unconscious woman's ear. "Mrs F, can you hear me? It's Elish." There was no response. El was deeply concerned, wondering how long the woman had been lying on the floor, her skin felt cool to El's touch. Elish looked her over for any obvious sign of injury. *Has she fallen over and hit her head, had a stroke, a heart attack?* All these questions were running through El's head, she tried again, "Mrs Fitzgibbon, it's Elish." This time she heard a small groan escape from slightly blue tinged lips. Deciding not to move her neighbour for fear that something was broken, Elish continued to talk to her using soothing words and telling her that help would be here soon. Sure enough, not five minutes later Elish could hear the sound of a siren getting closer. She stayed with her neighbour until she heard the doors open, then quickly made her way to the front door to let the paramedics in.

"My neighbour is lying unconscious in the kitchen." El's tone was a touch frantic, but tinged with relief now that medical help had arrived.

The navy blue suited man and woman followed Elish and quickly began to assess the elderly woman. Wasting no time placing an oxygen mask over her face and running an IV line into her

arm. They began to fire questions at Elish.

"What's her name?"

"Mrs Fitzgibbon." The man began talking to his patient as the woman continued to question Elish.

"Have you any idea how long she has been unconscious?"

"Has she spoken to you?"

"Do you know of any medical complaints she may have?"

Elish answered the questions to the best of her ability, as the pair continued to assess her neighbour.

"What do you think is wrong?"

"It looks like she's had a fall. We're concerned about the possibility of broken bones and her temperature is low. She may have been on the floor overnight." the guy answered as the pair began getting Mrs Fitzgibbon onto the gurney as gently as possible.

Elish winced inwardly at the thought of the poor woman being on the kitchen floor all that time. "Will she be alright?" El knew it was a stupid question as soon as it left her mouth, but she was concerned.

The blonde female turned to El, "Sorry, we won't know anything else until they see her at the hospital."

"Where are you taking her?"

"Beaumont."

"Alright. I'll make sure things are taken care of here first, and then I'll be there as soon as I can. I'm Elish Maloney, I live next door."

"Okay, we have to get going, we'll let them know in the accident and emergency unit."

Elish took one last look at the frail Mrs Fitzgibbon and said a silent prayer that she would recover from whatever had happened.

As soon as the ambulance left, sirens wailing, Elish set about doing what she could. First she called her brother, Thomas, she figured he could fix the back door where she had split the wood. Next she fed the rather forlorn looking cat and put some water in her or was it his dish? Elish couldn't be sure about that. With a name like Tac it was hard to tell. That done, she nipped back

across to her own cottage to grab a quick shower before Thomas turned up to fix the door.

Elish arrived back at her neighbours to find her brother had already started on the door.

"Morning, Tommy," she greeted over the hammering.

"Ah if it isn't wonder woman." He teased. El had earlier offered him a quick explanation of the morning's events. "Kicking in doors and saving damsels in the distress, all before breakfast."

El smiled at his joking. "What's the damage, Tommy?"

"Ach, I can just patch it up for now, Elish, no need to put a new lock on."

El, nodded and watched as her brother proficiently drove nails home into the new bit of wood he had cut.

"Is she going to be okay?"

"I don't know yet. I'm going to head to the hospital as soon as you finish up here."

"Almost done, El, just need to check the lock is working then that's me."

Elish made a quick call to the centre and let Bren know she would be in later. Then walked Tommy to his van, the family name emblazoned on the side.

"Thanks a lot, Tommy, you've been a great help. I really appreciate you coming out here."

"It was no problem, El, I hope the old dear recovers." With that he hopped in his van and with a quick wave drove off.

Elish arrived at work two hours later. Mrs Fitzgibbon had fallen and broken her hip so she was being kept in hospital and all being well she would have surgery the following day to replace the damaged hip socket. Her neighbour was such a sprightly woman El wondered how she would cope with the restrictions the surgery would put upon her normally active lifestyle. The woman danced, did her garden, she was always keeping herself busy pottering around her house and walking daily to the shops. It was going to be a difficult time for her neighbour.

El arrived at the wine bar, a little after 7pm, to find Naomi already seated at the table reserved for them. As she approached the table she took a moment to observe her friends dark exotic

complexion. With her long silky brown hair, high cheekbones and full lips. Naomi was in a word, beautiful and not for the first time Elish thought what a truly lucky man Declan Connelly was.

Naomi's eyes locked onto El's as the brunette approached, a wide smile greeting her slightly late friend. She tapped her watch in mild reproach, lateness being a pet hate of hers.

El held up her hands, "I know, and I'm sorry. I popped in to see Mrs Fitzgibbon after work, she's a bit lonely in the hospital so I stayed as long as I could."

"Ah, in that case you're excused for being late. I'm a sucker for a good cause."

"Thank you, you are too gracious." El took a seat opposite her friend.

"How is she doing anyway? Besides fed up being in hospital."

"The surgery has been a success, she came through it well, there was a slight concern with her age, but she's made of strong stuff. They couldn't repair the damage to the bone, so they have fitted a GK nail into the top of her femur to act as the new ball to rotate in her hip joint."

Naomi gave her friend a funny look, since when did El talk like a doctor? "Eh, in English please, El?"

"Can't you just ask Declan?" El whined as Naomi shook her head. "Fine. Mrs F has a new hip."

"Couldn't you have just said that in the first place?" Naomi chastised.

"I thought with you being the wife of a doctor you would have preferred the jargon."

Naomi made a face. "Where are you getting all the technical details anyway?"

"A chart on the wall outside the orthopaedic ward." Naomi rolled her eyes. "It's really cool what they can do, Naomi. With graded exercise and proper care and attention Mrs F will be good as new."

"That's great news, El." Naomi saw this as her opening, "Speaking of news I have some of my own."

"You do?" El's curiosity was peaked.

"Look I know this isn't a great time for you, El, with all that has happened in the last couple of weeks, but I really wanted you to know as soon as possible."

Elish was becoming concerned now and just wanted Naomi to spit it out the tension was getting to her. *Was she leaving? Had Declan gotten a new job somewhere else?* Potential scenarios were racing through El's mind as she waited for her friend to continue.

El watched as Naomi took a deep breath; barely able to keep the smile off her face she said, "I'm pregnant." then sat perfectly still awaiting El's response. She watched in rapt fascination as a myriad of emotions ran across her friend's face. Confusion first, followed by what appeared to be relief, then a huge grin exploded forth.

"Pregnant! Oh wow. That is fantastic!" El was out of her seat in a flash, kneeling next to Naomi's chair as the pregnant woman looked on stunned by her friend's antics. El began rubbing Naomi's abdomen, then much to her chagrin she kissed it, right there in the restaurant.

El looked up at her startled friend, eyes brimming with happiness she said, "This is great Naomi, there is a little you and Declan in here!" She rubbed her stomach again until Naomi finally came to her senses.

"Elish. Elish! Get up, you're causing a scene!"

El laughed, "This is just wonderful Naomi." She got to her feet and took her seat again. "I am so happy for you. What does Declan think?"

"Oh, he's over the moon. Totally looking forward to being a dad."

"And what about you?"

"I couldn't be happier, El. I really want to be a Mother."

"This baby is going to be so well loved, I can hardly wait." El paused then exclaimed, "Oh my God. You're pregnant!" Both women could hardly contain their joy and Naomi knew that when the time came she would be making the right choice. She could think of no one better than Elish, to be a godparent to her son or daughter.

As the meal progressed both women chatted about everything and anything, including the possibilities for a new location for work. At the end of the meal the pair sat sipping coffee, Naomi going for decaffeinated, giving up caffeine was a small hardship in her opinion, but well worth the effort.

As usually happened when these two were out alone, a couple of guys gravitated to their table, intent on chatting the pair up. They had become used to the scenario and had developed a quick way of being left alone, though tonight El's version had a new twist.

"Hello ladies, I'm Gary and this is my friend Eddie." Eddie added his hello, especially in Naomi's direction.

Naomi nodded politely as El answered. "Nice to meet you, I'm gay and my friend is married and pregnant."

Gary and Eddie stood in stunned silence as they absorbed El's words. Then they both laughed. "I

take it that means we have no chance?"

"You would be right, but thanks for stopping by."

The four shared a laugh and the usual comments of how unfortunate it was that two beautiful women were off limits, but it was a good-natured exchange and neither Elish nor Naomi were remotely bothered, unfortunately it was not always the case.

"That was easy," El remarked casually.

"Hmm, I think it was the additional, *and pregnant* that did it. You being gay and my being married isn't often that much of a deterrent."

"True, maybe in future I'll just say, *we're pregnant*. Though I have to admit, I find pregnant women a real turn on."

Naomi looked at El in disbelief. "You what? Get away with you."

"I'm being serious, Naomi, when my sister in laws were pregnant, my brothers started to worry that I was after their wives, I spent that much time rubbing their bellies. I just think that pregnant women are really attractive." El raised an eyebrow and leered ever so slightly at her friend.

"So what you're saying, Elish is that you're going to be feeling me up every chance you get?"

"Something like that." El mumbled.

Naomi stared at her friend, there was something different in El's tone, that she picked up on, then it struck her, El really was being serious. She leaned a little closer to her friend, her voice low. "El, you have my permission to feel me up any time you like." She watched on with great satisfaction, as El blushed right there in front of her.

"Behave, Naomi." El hissed.

"Oh, this is going to be so good. I can't believe you will really have the hots for me!"

"Get used to it, cause it will only get worse." El grinned with little apology at the new revelation. It was true she was going to think her friend was extra hot during her pregnancy.

When they left the wine bar Elish insisted upon walking Naomi to her car, already slipping into protective mode.

"Jesus, El, if this is what you're like after eight weeks, I dread to think what will happen when I'm eight months."

"Humour me."

They stopped at the white Volvo, where Elish pulled her friend into a tight hug. "I really am delighted for you and Declan. It's such wonderful news." El said as she continued to hug her friend.

Naomi pulled back and kissed her on the lips. "You really are a terrific friend, Elish. I know that you must be hurting right now, but you are able to be genuinely happy for me. I really appreciate that."

There was a pause as the two shared a connection, before stepping out of the hug. Naomi decided to ask the question that had been nagging her most of the day. "I noticed that there has been no sign of Aisling or her car since Friday. Do you know anything about that?"

"Not really." El sighed, she had noticed too. How could she not when she looked for the little silver Mercedes every time she was in the car park. "We had words on Friday afternoon, I...I think I may have been a little harsh."

This was news to Naomi, "What happened?"

"I was angry and she was there." El shrugged. "She followed me back to the office after the incident with the methadone. I was so raw, Naomi, I couldn't think straight." El shook her head as if trying to erase some painful memory. "She offered support and I told her I didn't need anything from her, then I told her to go...I haven't seen or heard from her since."

El looked truly sad and Naomi felt deeply for her friend. "That could explain her absence, or perhaps she just can't face being around the centre and the shops after her father's decision?" Even as she said it, Naomi knew that was unlikely. Aisling had been around every day last week. Had she not wanted to face them, she surely would have stayed away before now.

El smiled sadly at her friend, appreciating her attempts at easing El's conscience, but seeing the flaws for herself. "I miss her, Naomi. She has hurt me, but I miss her."

Early Friday afternoon found Elish back at the hospital. She was to meet with the Occupational Therapist to discuss Mrs F's discharge, or lack of it. Her neighbour had been so upset the day before when she heard that she may not get home for a while due to her living on her own and having no family who could come and help her out until she was able to look after herself again.

Walking onto the ward she found the OT already waiting by Mrs F's bed.

"Oh, here's Elish now." She heard her neighbour tell the woman with her.

The woman in the white tunic and green trousers introduced herself. "Hi, I'm Emma Hughes,

Mrs Fitzgibbon's Occupational Therapist."

El shook the hand offered, "Elish Maloney, Mrs F's neighbour." El's gaydar pinged, the woman before her was feminine looking and certainly her outfit was giving nothing away, but El just got that vibe, perhaps it was the once over she had received.

Elish sat down in the only available chair, while Emma perched on the edge of Mrs F's bed. The OT laid out the principle problems that were complicating the discharge then she and Elish along with Mrs F set about overcoming them. By the end of the chat El had a list of things to do over the weekend, including moving furniture so that Mrs F's living room could be converted into a temporary bedroom. Elish assured Emma that she could organise friends and neighbours and set up a rota to look after Mrs F's needs until she was able to do so herself. Overnight, El would be right next door, just a phone call away and she could be there in minutes. For her part Emma would arrange a district nurse to assist Mrs Fitzgibbon with bathing and would also go to the cottage that afternoon to measure the bed and toilet heights for any adaptations that may be required and order any equipment needed. Elish never imagined that there could be so many stumbling blocks to getting a person home from hospital, but apparently at this stage the new hip was most susceptible to dislocating and the utmost care would have to be taken to avoid this.

After everything was arranged, Emma agreed that if everything went to plan, Mrs F could be home by Tuesday. The OT would take her home to approve the discharge from hospital, apparently Mrs F had to be shown how to get in and out of cars, as well as use her new equipment. Elish said she would be there for Mrs F getting home, to help her settle back in and thanked Emma for co-ordinating the discharge. El had always wondered what an Occupational Therapist actually did, now she had a bit more insight she realised they are a vital cog in big wheel. Mrs F had even been taught new techniques for dressing herself that would avoid damaging her hip while offering independence and privacy. El recalled fondly how the day before Mrs F had taken great delight in demonstrating how proficient she had become with her 'helping hand'. Using the picker upper to put her slippers on and pick up various items from her side cabinet. The poor woman was so desperate to get home she must have been perfecting her techniques for hours!

Mrs Fitzgibbon was a lot happier after the meeting; she thanked Emma telling her that she was very grateful and really looking forward to Tuesday. Then the OT left taking the house keys from Elish, assuring El she would pop them through her letterbox when she was finished.

"And you, Elish Maloney, have a heart of gold. A finer neighbour I could never wish for." The older woman said with all sincerity.

"You're not so bad yourself, Mrs F, you don't even play your music too loud," El added cheekily, pleased to see her neighbours spirits finally lifting.

"How's Tac, Elish."

"Oh, healthy but missing you." El still wasn't sure what sex the cat was and had done everything to avoid using gender specific terms. She was still getting used to Mrs F hearing her clearly, that

had been a shock. She had greeted her groggy neighbour on Wednesday in her usual raised voice hoping the woman would hear her, only to watch on astonished as Mrs F begged her to lower her voice as she had been fitted with a new hearing aid.

"I miss him too and I can't wait to see him."

Ah, mystery solved El thought. "He's eating well, but he looks a little lost every time I go in to feed him. I'm sure he will be over the moon when he sees you again."

"You know, Elish, it's not that the people here haven't been wonderful. I just miss home, you know? I've never been away and I don't want to stop doing things for myself."

El recognised the concern in her neighbour's words. She was worried that if she didn't get home soon, she might never. Mrs F had seen it happen to friends after what appeared to be a simple fall led to them never getting home again. Ending up in sheltered accommodation or worse a home for the elderly. Elish would do everything she could to help Mrs F regain her independence and keeping her mood up would be a big part of that.

"Don't worry yourself. I'll get everything organised over the weekend and I'll let Emma know first thing Monday morning, so she can go ahead and make the arrangements to get you home."

"Thank you so much, Elish, from the bottom of my heart." Mrs Fitzgibbon took El's larger hand in her own and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"You're most welcome. I'll see you soon, you take care."

Sunday morning found El for the first time that weekend with time on her hands. She had been very busy contacting people to help out with Mrs F on Friday evening and yesterday she had moved the furniture with the help of the older twins, Gerry and Gheordan. Mrs F's bed was now in her sitting room, which had been rearranged to accommodate it. Between that, her running and weekend chores she barely had time to stop and think, which suited Elish just fine. When she stopped to consider anything her thoughts immediately turned to Aisling, which in turn invoked feelings in El that she was not comfortable with. Instead she was filling her spare time and if truth were told was almost relieved that Mrs Fitzgibbon needed her at the moment, it allowed her to focus on someone other than herself.

El glanced around looking for yet another chore to keep her busy, but knew it wouldn't be enough to occupy her mind, just her time. Glancing at her watch she had an hour before Sunday mass started, pondering over her decision for just a moment El's mind was made up. She would go to church early to attend confession; there was always confession on Sunday morning prior to the holy sacrament. Who knew, maybe a chat with the priest would help ease her guilt over the

incident at the drug centre, at the very least her Mam would be pleased to hear she went to confession.

El put a Mac on over her dress slacks and lambs wool crew neck. The weather this day was damp and the air felt heavy. El rarely enjoyed running in this type of weather, there was just something so cloying and depressing about it. Her run earlier that morning had left her feeling sad and gloomy.

The drive to the church only took 15 minutes; Elish had been a member of the congregation since she was a toddler. Most Sundays El attended the same mass as her Mam. It was as familiar to Elish, as pulling on a favourite jacket or walking into her childhood home. She missed the house she had grown up in, but had fully supported her mother's decision to move, it had never felt the same since the day her Father didn't come home from work. The church felt safe, she felt like she belonged here and was always welcome. Some of her friends found it difficult to understand why she would continue to be a member of an institution, which condemned her lifestyle and choices, but for Elish it wasn't so much about the catholic faith as more a sense of belonging. In truth El would be happy to attend any ceremony, it didn't have to be a catholic service. The reason for coming here was that she liked this church and the people who congregated within it.

Elish parked the Mondeo a few streets from the church, despite getting here early. She wouldn't take up a parking space that could be better used by someone less able than herself. She had two perfectly good legs and could easily walk the extra distance. Looking up into the grey sky El knew it was about to rain so she picked up her step and walked purposefully towards the heavy wooden doors of the old building. As the door closed behind her El felt the stillness immediately. It was rare that she was inside the building when it was virtually empty. She glanced towards the confessional box and noted that there was one person kneeling in prayer, El guessed they had already been in. She walked towards the pews outside the confessional, her footsteps echoing within the cold building. It always felt cool inside the church, even in the middle of summer the stone building was cool.

Entering the confessional she sat down on the hard wooden surface. A grate separated herself from the priest, she wondered which one would be in attendance.

The seated figure on the other side of the box began a blessing when Elish was seated, she knew instantly that it was Father O'Neil and she almost groaned out loud, he was such a sweetie wifey, he knew everything that was going on in the community.

"Bless me Father for I have sinned, it has been several months since my last confession."

"Go ahead my child."

"It's Elish Father." The brunette decided to forgo the pretence, that this confession would actually be full and El would truly repentant all sins she had committed. They both knew it wasn't going to happen.

"Elish? Elish, who I wonder?" El rolled her eyes, here we go.

"Could this be the Elish who's name I have heard spoken no less than one hundred times in the last week? The Elish who rescued a fair maiden from a knife wielding individual intent on harm? The Elish, who assisted her poor elderly neighbour after a serious fall, got her to hospital and then...got her back out? Not only that but the woman is now able to hear. I've heard talk of a canonisation." Father O'Neil chuckled at his own joke.

"Keep it up Father and I'm out of here." *Don't you have to be dead for that?* El wondered.

"Alright, alright, Elish. Just one more though...you'll like this, I promise." He paused for effect. "Is this the Elish who is now the best suitor in all of Dublin, for men and women I might add. I heard two ladies talking in the village; I can't say whom mind you, obviously to protect their daughter's identities. Anyway, these daughters are unmarried and obviously the wheels have been turning in the heads of their mothers. Apparently, if their daughters 'aren't the marrying kind' they wouldn't have any objections if it were your good self being brought home to meet the family. Though I must say. Elish, if rumours are to be believed, I think that ship has sailed, if you catch my drift." He added in a conspiratorial whisper.

El shared a chuckle with him on that one; the women were already an item.

"Well it's not everyday I get a local celebrity in the confessional, so what brings you here...apart from your Mam that is?" He chuckled again.

Finally, El thought, She would actually be able to get a word in. "I won't be confessing everything father, well I can, but I won't repent."

"Let's stick to the sins you wish to repent Elish and not the ones you intend to keep repeating."

"Good enough, Father. Obviously you've heard of the incident at the drug rehab centre?"

"Indeed, indeed."

"I went too far, Father, I lost control."

"Go on."

El bit her bottom lip, she may not enjoy free use of the confessional but she did take seriously those sins she wished to confess. She would not seek forgiveness unless she was truly sorry. "It's complicated father, I was intent on stopping the man with the knife, which I did, but I didn't stop there. After he was disarmed I continued to inflict harm upon him. I lost all control Father, I'm not sure what would have happened if my friend had not been there to stop me."

There was silence in the small confines of the confessional as they both absorbed what El had said.

"Do you think, had there been no-one else around the outcome would have been different?"

There it was, the question that Elish had been asking herself for the past week. "I think..." El stopped and drew in a deep breath before trying again. "I was intent on forcing the methadone into his mouth. Had I been successful, he would have overdosed on it. What the outcome of that would have been is anyone's guess, a trip to the hospital to pump his stomach? I don't know, father, I just don't know."

"Are you sorry for your actions, Elish?"

"Yes, Father and not just my actions. I'm sorry for the hurt and disappointment I have caused to the people I love through those actions."

"And what of your concerns, Elish? How do you feel about all of this?"

El bit her lip again as she considered his words and formed her response. "It concerns me greatly. I've been shocked to learn this about myself. I'm shaken over the loss of control. I'm worried that it could happen again."

The priest took a few moments to think about his response. "I've known you many years, Elish, and in all that time I have never seen you be anything less than a hard working young woman who would go that extra mile to help those less fortunate than yourself. You love your friends and family and your respect in the community is more than deserved. Your recent actions are clearly weighing heavily on your conscience. I believe that in the unlikely event that this type of situation should ever arise again, you will not lose control due to the learning experience you are going through now."

"I hope you are right, Father."

"I have faith in you, Elish. Don't get me wrong, your actions almost led to something more serious and it's right that you should have feelings of remorse, but I am confident that you will learn from this and grow as a person."

"Thank you, Father," El sounded a little reserved, hoping that the priest was correct, but not trusting herself.

"Give yourself time, Elish. You will come to terms with what has happened...and perhaps, other events too." He added a little cryptically, but Elish knew exactly what he was getting at. The incident had brought home the truth that she had not gotten over her Father's death. She wanted some sort of revenge, she wanted someone to pay and she needed to perhaps let go of the part of her that raged over the injustice of losing her Father. Unfortunately even now sitting in a confessional booth she felt the anger bubbling under the surface.

"It won't be easy, Father, but perhaps in time...well, you never know."

Father O'Neil offered Elish a blessing and made a sign of the cross, "Go in peace my child." He

murmured and El appreciated the sentiment. He never offered her absolution; she couldn't accept it unless she was willing to repent all sins.

Monday morning was an extremely busy one for Elish; she had barely had a moment to get up out of her seat to grab a coffee. As soon as El entered the office she had made the all important call to Emma at the hospital informing her that everything was in place for Mrs F, now the discharge hinged on what Emma called a *discharge home visit*, which basically meant that if the OT was satisfied that Mrs Fitzgibbon was going to be safe at home then she would discharge her and head back to the hospital on her own, if she saw anything that concerned her she would not approve the discharge. Elish had enquired as to what would happen if Mrs F refused to go back to the hospital? There had been a brief laugh on the other end of the phone before Emma informed El that it wasn't unusual for a patient to refuse to leave their home and she would be bringing a self discharge form to be signed by Mrs F in the event of that occurring. El smiled at this knowledge, she now knew that Mrs F was definitely getting home tomorrow afternoon, there was no way she would leave her cottage to go back to hospital under any circumstances.

The rest of El's morning had been spent looking for new premises for the centre. The local girls high school was proving to be a real possibility. The gradual decline in the number of girls attending over the last few years meant classrooms were lying empty. Elish had spoken at length to the school's headmistress, Mrs McBride, a lovely lady, but she had made it clear that under no circumstances could she consider the possibility of the combined unit moving to the school premises. She was willing to enter negotiations for a permanent space for the community centre, but the drug rehab centre would have to find an alternative location. El understood her reasons, but it left both her and Naomi in a spot. The centres worked in tandem and being in the same building was of great benefit to everyone. If clients had to go any distance to get between the centres it was highly likely that a lot of vulnerable clients would slip through the net.

Elish sat back rubbing her temples, with no straight forward solution it meant that moving to the school would be unlikely at this point in time. Stretching out the kinks in her body she decided it was time for some lunch before she began to tackle her in tray.

El followed the lovely aromas coming from the kitchen as her stomach began to make its demands know.

"Mmm, something smells wonderful."

Molly and Bren turned to look at El from their place at the kitchen counter where they were making toasties for what appeared to be the entire building.

"Oh, hi, Elish, what would you like?"

El gave that all of two seconds thought before replying, "Cheese and tomato?"

"Coming right up, I take it you'll be wanting the two, what with all the extra running."

"That would be wonderful, Molly." El replied giving the woman her usual charming smile then turned to look at Bren who had been unusually quiet throughout the exchange. Even if she didn't want any conversation, El always merited a grunt of response at least. Bren though seemed more intent on observing El than speaking. Every time the Brunette caught the younger woman's eye Bren seemed to be waiting on her boss to say something. Eventually El lost patience with the game.

"Everything alright, Bren?"

Bren's eyes immediately swung to the floor. She glanced over at Molly who shrugged her reply. The two of them were now acting odd and seemed to be communicating non verbally much to El's annoyance.

"Would either of you care to tell me what's going on?"

Molly glanced to Bren who shook her head 'no', before replying to Elish. "Nothing."

El sighed. "Okay, when either of you do decide to enlighten me, I'll be in my office." With that El stood up to head there, she wasn't in the mood for anyone's games.

She heard Molly call after her, "I'll bring your lunch along, Elish."

"Fine." She could here their muted voices deep in discussion as she walked back along the corridor.

Fifteen minutes later a rather sheepish looking Molly brought Elish her lunch, along with a mug of coffee.

"Don't get upset, Elish, it's nothing personal, Bren's just... well you'll find out soon enough and it'll all make sense." Molly paused awaiting her boss's response.

El nodded, "I'll try to be a little more patient, Molly, but she really was acting strangely, even for Bren."

"Maybe you should tackle your in tray after lunch?" Molly suggested.

El knew a hint when she heard one and intended to do just that. "Thanks, Molly."

"You're welcome, El."

As with most days at the centre, El's plans were disrupted with an unexpected turn of events. No sooner had she started on her in tray than the phone interrupted her progress.

"Elish Maloney."

"Hello, Ms Maloney, it's James Keenan."

El almost pulled the phone from her ear to stare at it in disbelief. The man actually sounded courteous. She was immediately suspicious. "Mr Keenan, what can I do for you?"

"I'm over in the office and I wondered if you could find the time to come across to discuss an urgent matter?"

El's heart rate immediately picked up, she couldn't help the response. She hadn't seen anything of Aisling for over a week and despite everything her immediate concern was for the little blonde. "I'm on my way."

Taking the stairs to Aisling's office at a run, El stopped on the top step to compose herself. *Calm down Elish, this could be about anything.* She was trying to rationalise her thoughts. The man was well known for making demands on people and expecting them to jump at his word, but Elish couldn't shake the feeling of dread. It was his tone that concerned her. He was never solicitous, instead usually more condescending and of course smug.

El knocked on the door and was immediately granted entrance as James Keenan opened the door and invited her to take a seat.

"Ms Maloney, so good of you to take the time to see me." He sat behind the desk and El couldn't stop her thoughts straying to memories of what had happened on that desk. When she looked up to meet Mr Keenan's eyes, he seemed to recognise where her thoughts had strayed and clearing his throat brought their focus back to his reason for inviting Elish here.

"Aisling has gone." He stated pointedly.

El blinked rapidly, "Gone where?"

"To Edinburgh and I want you to bring her back."

Elish stared stupefied at the man in front of her. *He wants me to go bring her back? What the hell!* "I don't think so." El stated tersely.

James Keenan nodded his head in understanding of her response. "Let me explain further. First of all there are some details that you should be made aware of and I'm sure when you hear them, you will have a new understanding of what has been going on around here."

This peaked her interest, "Go on."

"Aisling was never in favour of the sale. To the extent that she went over my head with a plan of her own. Back at the beginning of August my daughter drafted a new document that made additional stipulations on the sale of the land and buildings. The company want the land desperately and they agreed to the changes. Aisling then showed me the entire agreement and asked me to endorse it. All it needed was my signature. That never happened straight away as I was still negotiating the price I could get for the land." He offered Elish a wry smile, "I was letting it be known that the land was for sale, I might have gotten a better offer."

EI wasn't surprised to hear this; the man must be good at this sort of thing after all. You don't get rich on these deals by capitulating too easily. She said nothing, waiting on the landlord to continue his pitch.

"Aisling has been urging me to make a decision and sign this document since the day the company approved the changes. It seems she has a real soft spot for your centre, since that was the change that was made. A brand new centre would be built to replace the current older building that both yourself and Mrs Connelly use. You would both have new premises." He stopped to let that information sink in.

Elish was stunned by this new information. Aisling had cared all along, if the timing was correct it seemed that she set about making these changes right after the day Elish met her in the butchers shop and offered to show her round.

"She would tell me all about the work that you and your staff put in for the local community. How valuable the drug rehab centre is. Not to mention what a wonderful bunch of people you are. My daughter and I are very different; she cares about people and lets that interfere with business. I don't. However on this occasion, the change wouldn't affect me financially."

Elish knew what was coming, she had put two and two together and come up with the answer, but she had to ask. "So why didn't you sign?"

James Keenan looked slightly uncomfortable with the answer, but he gave it none the less. "I changed my mind after I found you with my daughter."

Elish stood up abruptly, "I ought to wring your scrawny neck!" she hissed.

The landlord swallowed heavily, he found the woman in front of him intimidating, but quickly regained his composure, not wanting her to know that. "But you won't because I doubt the Garda will be able to overlook a second assault, hmmm."

There it was, the smug bastard was back and Elish hated him all over again.

He smiled at her, but it never reached his eyes, there was no sincerity in the sentiment. "Now here is the deal. I haven't signed anything yet. If you go to Edinburgh and bring back my daughter I will sign the agreement that Aisling put forward, that includes the rebuilding of a combined centre for yourself, Mrs Connelly and your respective employees. Will you bring her

back for me?" He delivered the question with a confidence that conveyed his certainty of the pending victory; he could not imagine Elish turning him down.

There were so many thoughts and feelings running through El's head. A part of her still wanted to do the man physical harm, while another part of her wanted to ask for the address and hop on the first plane to Edinburgh. Elish bowed her head, deep in thought, after a couple of minutes she knew what she had to do.

She raised her head and looked the expectant James Keenan in the eye. "No."

He was about to congratulate her on making a decision that would mutually benefit them both; instead a look of absolute incredulity replaced his previous smugness.

"No?" was his disbelieving question, "But I'm going to save the centres!" He was on his feet unable to comprehend El's decision.

Elish remained calm, what she had to say was important and she wanted this man to listen. "And I hope you still can find it within yourself to do so - but the only way you are going to get Aisling back...and I don't mean back to Dublin, I mean as your daughter, who will love and respect you, is if you go and get her yourself. You need to go and bring your children home...both of them." El paused for breath; she was on a roll now. "Until you and your wife do that it won't matter whether Aisling is living under your roof or on the other side of the world. Until you start accepting your children for who they are, you will never have what is most important...their love and respect. You can demand and control all you want - you might even be able to get her back - but is that really what you want? Will you settle for just having her physically close by without her love? Or do you want it all?"

James Keenan sat in his chair with a stunned look upon his face. He was speechless.

Elish continued on, unabated. "I'm not the one who can do that for you. Only you can do it." El left him to think about what she had said and she sent up a silent prayer that she was making the right decision. *Naomi is going to kill me.* She winced as she thought of the discussion she was about to have with her friend.

Deciding not to waste any time El headed straight for Naomi's office, almost wishing that her friend wasn't going to be there. As Elish approached the door it was open, she knocked once out of good manners then entered and closed the door behind her.

"El, Good to see you." Naomi looked fantastic and it pained Elish to know that she was about to wipe the smile from her friend's face. She attempted one of her own, but knew it was weak.

"What's up, El?"

El put her hands up in a placating gesture. "Don't kill me."

Naomi frowned, she had no idea what Elish was talking about, she watched as her friend sighed deeply and took a seat.

"I just had a very interesting chat with our landlord." Naomi raised her eyebrows. "This is a long story, maybe I could get a coffee?" El was stalling and they both knew it, but Naomi allowed the temporary distraction and got El a coffee and a decaf one for herself.

Elish explained all that had transpired in Aisling's office with James Keenan and watched Naomi's face go through a range of responses as the story unfolded. Hope, confusion, disbelief and finally resignation. She sat in quiet contemplation as she mulled over all that Elish had told her.

"So let me get this straight. Aisling, who we have both thought badly of since we were served notice to end the lease agreement, was actually all this time working to save the centres? Then when her father found out you were screwing his daughter he changed his mind?"

El winced, "Yes."

"Then when he offers you a deal that means the centres will once again be saved you turn him down because you want what's best for your ex girlfriend?"

"That about sums it up I think."

Naomi nodded and offered El a sad smile. "I desperately want to keep doing what we do, Elish, but it wouldn't have felt right under those circumstances. Sure a part of me wants to shout and scream at the injustice of it all, but it isn't your fault. You made the right choice, as you always would."

Naomi stood up from her seat and approached her nervous friend. She pulled El up from her seat and took her in a tight embrace. "I am so sorry, El, for the way things have turned out for you personally." Elish buried her face into Naomi's neck and let her tears fall silently as Naomi rubbed her back soothingly, while murmuring to Elish.

"God, Naomi, I was horrible to her and all that time she just wanted what was best for us."

El sounded so distraught that Naomi felt her own eyes fill up and her throat became tight with emotion. "I know, Elish, but you weren't aware of what was going on between Aisling and her father. The whole thing just seems so unfair on both of you."

El shook her head, "No. Not just Aisling and myself. My actions, getting involved with the landlord's daughter has cost all of us, Naomi. Because of me and my fucking libido, we won't have a place of work in six months time. I should have known better than that! I do know better

than that!" Elish was thoroughly disgusted with herself on so many levels she couldn't even begin to sort through her ragged emotions.

"No, Elish, you can't think like that. You can't blame yourself for the actions of James Keenan. He is a homophobic, spiteful bastard, who would rather see his daughter hurt than happy. It's not your fault, El."

Elish never made it to her in tray that afternoon; it wasn't until the following morning that she happened upon the reason why Bren was acting so strangely.

"What the hell!" Elish almost shrieked. There in her hand was a short perfunctory note giving two weeks notice. Bren was leaving and Elish was absolutely stunned. There had been no clue, no hint from her secretary and there was absolutely nothing in the letter that indicated any reason for her leaving. "Christ, this place is coming apart at the seams!" Elish was out the office door without another thought.

Marching up to the front desk, fuelled forward on a mix of shock and disbelief El stood until Bren raised her head from her computer screen. She watched as the young woman blanched at the sight of her boss.

"You're leaving?"

Bren nodded.

"Why?"

With that Bren burst into tears and Elish wasted no time in going to her distraught secretary and taking her in her arms.

"Shhh, come on, tell me what's wrong." El encouraged soothingly. She didn't cope well with tears and idly thought that perhaps if Aisling had turned them on the outcome would have been different, then banished the thought, Aisling had never struck her as much of a crier.

Bren began to talk but it came out as broken sentences and mumbling as she continued to sob. All El caught was that she didn't want to say anything.

"Come on, settle down a bit, Bren, I can't understand you."

The secretary nodded and attempted to compose herself. Elish pulled a chair over and sat close to the distraught girl.

"It's been so hard, El. I didn't even make up my mind till the weekend." She started to cry again.

"I love my job here."

"So what's made you decide to leave?" El was having a hard time following her secretary.

"I'm going to University."

"What?"

Bren nodded, "I got accepted late, I thought I wasn't going to get a place to start this year."

El was shocked; this was news to her, but the best news she could imagine. She remembered writing a reference to Trinity College, but after that had heard nothing. Elish had assumed that Bren had failed to get a place. Since the secretary never mentioned anything, El had taken her cue from Bren and let the matter drop.

"Social Work?"

Bren nodded and before she had time to say anything else El had swept her into a hearty hug.

"Bren! That's just, amazing! I had no idea you had gotten a place!"

Bren nodded and attempted to get her over exuberant boss to ease up on the bear hug just a little.

"I was awarded a place after my interview, but I had to get over 400 points on my leaving certificate to gain it. When the results came back I was just under what I needed, and I assumed that was it, I would have to apply again next year and top up on what I failed on, to increase my points."

El was nodding along with the information like an excited puppy. She knew Bren had been going to night school to do a higher leaving certificate, which she missed out on, having left school at sixteen.

"Then I got a phone call to say that there was a place for me. I took the weekend to think it over and well...I've decided this is what I really want."

"I am so, so happy for you, Bren. You will make a great Social worker. I really mean that. The initiative you have shown here, the way you have turned your life around in the last three years. You deserve good things, Bren. Lord knows we will miss you round here, but to see you move on to start a degree is just wonderful." El was beaming from ear to ear and it was infectious as Bren let go of a smile of her own, transforming her normally cool features.

Elish delivered a kiss to her cheek, "Does Naomi know?"

Bren shook her head, "I only told Molly because I was scared Elish, I needed someone to know."

"I understand. Do you want to tell Naomi yourself?"

"No, I couldn't, would you?"

"Can I tell her now?"

"Sure."

"Great, see you in a wee bit."

Elish practically bounded into Naomi's office, her friend looked at her like she had two heads. This was so different to the woman she had held the day before.

"Bren's going to university to be a Social Worker. She's leaving in two weeks!"

El watched as Naomi's face lit up at the news.

"Oh my God, that is the best news!" And it truly was for the two of them, this was the kind of story they lived for. Bren had been an addict when she first attended the drug rehab centre, hooked on heroin at age Seventeen. She cleaned up her act with the help of the staff and Elish, at Naomi's request had employed her as her new secretary. The two of them stood in Naomi's office beaming like proud parents.

"You know, Elish, this is why we do what we do." She shook her head still trying to take in the news. "She will make a terrific Social Worker."

El nodded, "I told her as much."

"It's great to see her go on to do this."

A thought suddenly occurred to El. "Hey, it's alright for you, Ms Campbell, now I have to find a new secretary." El whined.

Naomi grinned wickedly at her friend, "And I have just the person in mind." She held up a hand, "Now don't let the red hair put you off, and there is the nose ring, but he is a really great guy..."

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~ Conflict Of Interests ~

by Weebod

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

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

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

Part Six:

Elish woke from her slumber feeling well rested and immediately worried at the time. It was light outside; she must have set the alarm on her mobile phone incorrectly. Grabbing the device she checked the time. 7.30am. Frowning, it took a few moments for her brain to register the reason for sleeping in. It was a rest day, no running. Slumping back onto her mattress El blew out a relieved breath. She had deliberately set the alarm for later to avoid giving into the temptation of running despite it being a designated day of rest in her training programme. The urge to over train at this stage was very strong with race day quickly approaching. Elish had been feeling the first tell tale tingles as she considered what lay ahead in three weeks time. Right now it was anticipation, as race day approached she hoped to avoid too much anxiety, it tended to drain her reserves. Any hiccups now could make a big difference to her plans come race day.

Not bothering to shed her sleep wear El pulled a pair of heavy cotton jogging bottoms over her shorts and added a warm sweatshirt on top of her T-shirt. Pulling on a pair of sports socks, she made her way downstairs where she selected a pair of running shoes from her extensive collection, taking her usual perch on the bottom of the stairs she tied the laces. Finally grabbing two sets of keys she opened her front door and walked the long way around to her neighbours cottage. She didn't want to tempt falling flat on her face as she vaulted the fence between their properties since her body hadn't fully woken up yet.

El used one set of keys to open her neighbour's front door. It had been ten days since Mrs Fitzgibbon had been officially discharged from hospital and things were going reasonably well. They had gotten into an efficient morning routine, where El fed Tac and Mrs F, then went back to her own cottage to shower and have breakfast while they ate. She would return before she left for work to make sure Mrs Fitzgibbon had everything she needed until at least lunchtime, when the person on the rota for that day would come by to help with lunch. It was certainly a difficult time for her neighbour, not only having to cope with the pain and lack of mobility after surgery, the woman was finding it tough having to rely on others for the first time in her life. Not that Mrs F was ungrateful at all, Elish had found the woman to be quite the opposite, and had nothing but gratitude and praise for the people who came by to assist her. It was more to do with her

continued fear of not getting back to where she was before the accident.

Entering into a hallway similar, but not identical to her own, Elish called out to let her neighbour know it was her. "Morning Mrs F, it's Elish."

Walking towards her neighbour's temporary bedroom, Elish gently knocked on the door and awaited a reply from the older woman.

"Come in Elish. I'm awake."

"Good morning to you Mrs Fitzgibbon."

"And you Elish. How's the weather?"

"A wee bit overcast, but dry. Getting colder though." El watched as her neighbour gingerly manoeuvred herself to a sitting position on the side of the bed. El was always tempted to assist, but knew that this was part of Mrs F regaining full independence. She watched patiently as the robe, which was within easy reach was put on before Mrs F stood up, all part of her new dressing routine designed to reduce the possibility of damaging the precious new hip and healing tissue. Next Mrs F reached for her elbow crutches, keeping them in one hand she gingerly stood up fully, and then pushed her arms into the crutches. She was now ready to make her first trip of the day to the bathroom. Elish still remembered the day Mrs F had been brought home by Emma, the OT. The battle the woman had endured to make sure Mrs F agreed to the temporary removal of all her little rugs. Now El watched as Mrs F walked over clear carpet to the downstairs toilet and was grateful to the OT for insisting the rugs were removed.

Making her way to the kitchen, El first checked the litter tray, this activity had taken a bit of getting used to. Elish now had it down to a fine art. She had purchased some bags that lined the litter tray making changing it easier. She still hated doing it though. She bent down to give Tac a proper greeting; the cat was becoming more familiar with her and meowed and rubbed against her leg. She wasn't sure if he was a naturally suspicious creature, or if it was a cat trait, but he had been very cautious when she first started feeding him. Perhaps he had just been concerned about his mistress. El was no expert when it came to cats, though she knew a lot of women who were.

Washing her hands, Elish heard the resultant flush from the toilet in the hall, so she set about making up Mrs F's breakfast tray. The woman wasn't a big eater in the morning, tea, toast and jam was all she ever asked for. She made herself a little snack later in the day. El was certain that Mrs F would soon be doing her own breakfast and lunch, maybe even by the start of next week. She couldn't be sure, but she suspected the woman was getting up to no good when left to her own devices, El would be surprised if her neighbour was able to resist the temptation when no-one else was around. Probably a little dusting nothing too obvious. It just wasn't in the woman's nature to be idle.

"Morning Boss," Bren greeted El, a defiant look on her face, daring Elish to say something. She took a long drag on her cigarette and casually flicked the ash from the tip. As El continued to look at Bren, the younger woman cockily raised her chin and blew her smoke out into the air, her eyes never leaving those of her boss.

Elish quirked a grin at this show of defiance. In truth she liked Bren's individuality. Bren had conformed albeit reluctantly, to the changes in her appearance that El had insisted upon. Skirting the rules and pushing the boundaries on and off for three years and here she stood today in all her gothic glory. Bren's favourite shade of lipstick adorning her full pouty lips, and leaving its mark on the cigarette tip every time she took a puff. Her attire was carefully chosen, all black to match her nail polish and heavily made up eyes. Siouxsie Sioux had turned up today in place of her secretary.

"Has Halloween come early this year?" Elish quirked a wry smile at her soon to be ex employee, "If you weren't leaving today I would sack you." She played along, knowing that this was Bren's way of saying, *I only changed because I had to*, but in truth, Elish knew that Bren having the willingness to adapt her appearance for a job would serve her well in the long term and that was good enough for El. "Try not to scare off too many folks today."

That comment earned her yet another casually defiant exhalation of smoke. El had always thought Bren's non verbal communication skills were artful. She was still chuckling when she entered her office.

At 3.30pm that afternoon all the available staff congregated in the conference room to bid Bren farewell and good luck for the future. Molly, as was often the case had organised the event. Each person having brought along something for the buffet, El's contribution was hastily purchased at lunchtime. A few bags of Tortilla chips with a range of dips to go with them. The boxes of wine were opened and soon everyone was helping themselves.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if I can have your attention please?" El's strong voice broke through the din of chatter, with the help of a loud "*Quiet!*" from Rosie.

El, nodded, "Thank you Rosie, that was very effective." A few chuckles rang out. "As you all know, we're gathered here this afternoon, because Bren is leaving us." There were a few cheers, mixed in with the odd *good riddance* for fun. "It seems that our Bren has seen fit to move onto pastures new and ordinarily I personally wouldn't be happy to see such a valuable member of our team leave, but on this occasion I couldn't be happier. I'm sure you all know by now that Bren is off to University to do Social Work, and I'm sure you'll agree that she is going to make one hell of a Social Worker!" There was thunderous applause, it went on for a few minutes much to Bren's great embarrassment, but inwardly she was enormously pleased.

When the applause and cheering died down Elish continued, "We're all going to miss you Bren, your charming wit and warm sunny outlook on life..." El got the laughter she was looking for. "On a serious note, and I'll be quick because I know you're not too comfortable in the spotlight

Bren. You came to us at a crossroads in your life and boy, did you turn the corner. You have been a fantastic acquisition to the centre in the last three years. You have shown initiative and despite all appearances, particularly today's," El and Bren both smiled, "you are fantastic with the general public. We are all so proud of you Bren."

"Here, here." Rang out amidst more cheering.

Molly came up next to finish the formal part of the afternoon. The entire staff had chipped in to purchase all the books that Bren would require for her first year of study. There were also some additional gifts, a Red Cross make-up parcel for when the money got tight, it was full of Bren's favourite brands, along with some music tokens and would last her a good while.

"I...Jesus, I don't know what to say. I'm overwhelmed, I want to thank you all, not just for today, but also for the last three years. Elish, for taking a chance on me, Naomi for having faith in me and all of you for accepting me...I'm going to miss you." That was it for Bren, she was too choked with emotion and for the first time Elish really saw what all this meant to her secretary. Molly gave the young woman a hug as the rest of the crowd smiled fondly at their co-worker, offering support and words of encouragement.

"Thanks, for everything."

After that the evening was only just getting started. The building was locked up by 4.45pm and the staff piled into cars to head into town. Bren had chosen a nightclub that started at 5.00pm, it was like doing your night out in reverse and the evening was aimed specifically at office workers to kick off their weekend right at the end of the Friday workday. TFI Friday the club was called, the title didn't take much working out for El, she was just thankful that come 9.30pm, the place had to be emptied for the re-opening of the club at 10.30pm.

It was just as El imagined, free entry and lots of drink promotions. The place was filling up quickly and the first round of bottled drinks seemed to cover every colour in the rainbow, El had never cared much for Alcopops preferring wine or lager. Tonight like Naomi she was sticking to soft drinks, she would pass the time watching everyone else get drunk around her.

"So how are you feeling?" It was around 8pm, though to El it felt more like a club at 1am, everything felt a little off kilter. Most of the staff from the centres were dancing or spread out around the club chatting to friends and still drinking their brightly coloured drinks. They seemed to be on a round of green coloured ones at the moment. El and Naomi had sequestered a spot overlooking the dance floor, each of them occupying a much sought after stool.

"I'm feeling good, El." Naomi smiled a big full smile that was contagious.

"You look great Naomi, you really do."

"Thanks. How about you, Elish, how have you been doing?"

El smiled a little sadly. "Ah, not too bad, been keeping myself busy. Between work, training and looking after Mrs F, I hardly have much time for anything else."

That concerned Naomi, it was one thing for El to be busy, but Naomi wondered if that meant Elish hadn't given herself much time to think about other events in her life. Naomi didn't want the mood to turn too sombre, this was Bren's night after all.

"Oh, my God, Look at Adam!"

Elish looked onto the dance floor in the direction Naomi had indicated. There was Adam, the boss of Employment Services dancing with his top off. El had to admit, the guy was in good shape, he clearly worked out. She shook her head as she took in the sight before her. Adam had to be the most vain man she knew and totally straight. He went for manicures, facials and spray tans. Judging by the smoothness of his bare chest it was evident he also went for waxing. The guy was always sporting the latest hairstyle of the trendy professional football players. He currently had a slightly longer look to his highlighted blonde locks, using wax to style it a certain way, that involved sweeping his fringe across his forehead. El wondered what women really found attractive about that look, it seemed so effeminate to her.

"So, if you were single would you go for someone like that?"

"God no! I can see why he is successful with women. He looks like most of the men in the magazines, but seriously not my type."

"What about if it were just a one night kind of thing?"

Naomi wrinkled her nose, "Nope. If I were single and into one night stands he wouldn't do it for me."

El was enjoying the game. They always seemed to end up having these kind of chats. "So look around...you're here, you're single and looking for some *hot* sex. Who would catch your eye?"

"Hmm," Naomi started looking around for potential candidates. "There's a guy over by the bar, tall, short dark hair."

"The one with the black shirt?"

"Yes."

"He looks like one of my brothers."

"Or three or four of them," Naomi joked.

"So you would go for him?"

"I like the way he looks, he would be a possibility, but he wouldn't be my first choice." The smile Naomi bestowed upon her friend told Elish all she needed to know.

"You are such a tease!"

"Am I?" Naomi pinned El with an intense hungry look.

El swallowed hard, was it getting hotter in here?

"Trust me El, if I were a single woman you would definitely be top of my list in those circumstances." Naomi shrugged, "I love my husband and you are my best friend, so it's purely hypothetical, but it's an honest answer."

El wondered if Naomi was being completely serious, God knows if ever her mood needed a pick me up it was now. With Aisling being gone and not answering her phone calls, she had all but given up hope on reconciling with the beautiful blonde.

"I think those pregnancy hormones are already kicking in." El joked.

Elish made her way to the toilets. The place was busy but not packed to the rafters, so there was room to manoeuvre through the throngs of early clubbers. The brunette entered a short corridor painted black, it was dimly lit and the heavy bass of the music was greatly muted here. Making her way to the toilets El leaned casually against the wall until a loo became available. As El washed her hands and moved towards the hand dryer she contemplated how soon she could make her escape. Checking her watch, it was 8.33pm; she thought it would be best to wait till the club closed now, that way she could take some of the drunks' home.

Leaving the bathroom El made her way along the dark corridor only to be met by Bren who was heading towards the bathroom.

"Hey Boss."

"Not anymore." El happily corrected, the inebriated woman.

"That's right, not anymore. So now I can do this."

El frowned as Bren moved forward, her eyes growing wider. *"Oh, no! She's not going to? Oh shit! Oh shit!"* Then Bren was kissing her ex Boss. El felt Bren's lips moving against her, she was still stunned, her eyes still open. *"Oh, what the hell. She's leaving, it's a one time thing."* Closing her eyes El gave into the kiss that Bren was insisting on having regardless of her compliance. Then just like that it was over.

Bren looked up at her ex boss, a smile on her lips. "Thanks, Elish. I always wanted to do that."

El cleared her throat, "Ah, you're welcome, Bren." She began to search for a way to extricate

herself from the situation without having to turn Bren down.

"It's okay, Elish. I know it's a one off thing. I'm not going to try and drag you home with me or anything. I'm not even sure I want to sleep with a woman, I've just always had a little thing for you."

El's relief was palpable. She hugged Bren. "I'm going to miss you, but thank God you never kissed me before!" She pecked Bren on the lips once more adding with a wink, "Cheeky mare!"

Bren laughed and made her way to the toilets.

Returning to sit next to Naomi, Elish wondered what her friend was staring at. "What's up with you?"

Naomi took the opportunity to peer closely at her friend. "How come your lips are all dark? Did you drink one of those Alcopops?"

"Shit," El exclaimed as she began rubbing away what must have been some of Bren's dark lipstick.

"What is that?" Naomi's eyes widened, "Don't tell me you got lucky while at the toilet!"

"Eh, not exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"Bren kissed me."

"You mean like a passionate, full on lip lock?"

El nodded, "Yes, that would be an apt description."

Naomi almost fell off her chair laughing. "The cheeky minx, I always knew she had a crush on you."

"Well I wish you had shared that with me! I never saw it coming. I'm just relieved that it's a one off thing. I was panicking back there."

"I wish I could have seen that."

"I had no idea. I just assumed she was straight, the woman had sex with her boyfriend in my bathroom!"

"It's your own fault for being so nice anyway, El. That's what started it."

"How do you mean?"

"The posters you had her make up not long after she had started working at the centre."

"Oh God. I'd forgotten about them. Those swine at the Butcher's ribbed me for weeks over them."

"That's because you never said it wasn't you that made them up."

"Well I couldn't do that to her. She hadn't long started in the job, it was hard enough without everyone knowing that Bren had been the one to do those posters. I wondered what the hell those two clowns behind the counter were on about. All those question about sex education. When they pointed to the poster on the wall inviting everyone in the community to a *Pubic Meeting*, I almost fainted on the spot!"

"Bren knows what you did. She found out you went around collecting all the posters and putting up new ones with the correct spelling. I think that's when she fell in love with you."

El rolled her eyes at Naomi's blatant exaggeration. "Oh, give over. *A little thing* for me apparently."

"Oh yeah. How little?" Naomi asked saucily.

"I think it's getting time to head home."

Naomi's laughed, revelling in her friend's discomfort. "Not before you dance with me Stud, come on."

El sat at her kitchen table eating her breakfast. It was 6.30am on a Monday bank holiday, but more important than that, it was Marathon day. All the months of training were over. This was it. Today El would find out just how effective her efforts over the previous months would be.

Being nervous was a good thing; El had studied some charts that showed how performance could be affected by nerves on the day of competition. Problems arose when anxiety set in, that could destroy all the weeks of training and effort in a few short hours. Elish didn't feel particularly nervous, it was more of an anticipatory flutter. She was keen to get going. She felt good and there were definitely a few extra tingles of anticipation as the time to the race start neared. El had planned this morning with military precision. The time between now and the race start was crucial. Elish had showered, had her breakfast and now she was about to head upstairs to don her race kit.

It was with a certain reverence that Elish laid the shorts, vest, socks and underwear that would take her through the twenty-six miles, on top of her bed. Retrieving her runner's version of a first

aid kit from the bathroom, El sat on the bed and began preparing her body for the race. A tube of Vaseline and a roll of Micropore tape, El set about covering the parts on her feet that were prone to blistering, her red spots. Then she used the Vaseline to cover all the parts of her body that would chafe during the many miles. El found that her upper arms were particularly prone to chaffing, as they moved repetitively in her natural running style. She also put the Vaseline on her nipples, though a problem more readily encountered by men, Elish never took any chances with her own.

Nothing Elish was using today was new. It was all tried and tested, from her underwear, to her running shoes. There would be no uncomfortable surprises with her equipment. Sitting in her underwear, a sports bra and pants, El pinned her race number to her vest. She had picked up her race pack from the Royal Dublin Society hall the day before. This included her race bib and number, and the yellow championChip, which she would attach securely to one of her running shoes.

Elish saw Naomi pull up in front of the cottage. She was ready and eager to get going. Sticking to the same routine as last year was another facet that helped El keep her nerves in check. She knew she could rely on Naomi arriving on time.

Opening the Volvo passenger door, El got in and reached for the seatbelt, catching her friend's mirth filled gaze as she struggled with the lock for the belt.

"What?"

"Good morning to you too, Elish."

"Oh, sorry. Morning."

Naomi chuckled, "It's alright, I know your focus is elsewhere. You all set?"

El gave one firm nod. "Absolutely, lets go."

"So, what time are you going to run today?"

"No comment."

"Looks like it's going be a wet race."

El nodded, "Yes, the forecast was for rain."

"You don't like running in the rain." Naomi observed.

"I have no choice."

Naomi gave up, knowing she wasn't going to get much conversation out of her intensely focussed friend. A few minutes later the car pulled up at the spot where Elish wanted to be dropped off. From here it would only be a short walk down a side street to the main event. This was just the start of many things today that growing up in Dublin, El could use to her advantage.

"Well, good luck, El."

El flashed her friend a small smile, "Thanks." She put her hand on the door handle intent on making her exit.

"Ah, not so fast there Stud."

Turning she gave Naomi a curious look. Naomi took El's face in her hands and planted an affectionate kiss on her lips. "Everyone wishes you all the best. We know you will do yourself proud." Naomi hugged El, then slapped her on the butt as she exited the car to make her way to the warm up area.

Elish made her way through the maze of runners just as the heavens opened. The rain however did nothing to dampen the buzz of excitement in the air that always permeated the mass of runners prior to the race start. Elish pulled the hood of her waterproof jacket tighter around her face in an attempt to keep as much of herself as warm and dry as possible before the start. Pulling a high-energy drink from her pocket she sipped on it as she looked around. Runners had begun to take shelter anywhere they could, under shop awnings, in doorways. Some had umbrellas, while others covered themselves with plastic bin bags. Up ahead, El could see some of the elite runners huddled inside a telephone box, while the more astute amongst them were inside the shops of the more understanding shopkeepers. The queues for the porta-loos remained long, knowing that she would soon need to use the facilities, the brunette made her way to one of the shops, a bakery owned by the mother of girl she went to school with. Mrs Carrigan was expecting her, El having done the exact same thing the previous two years and availed herself of the use of the bakery shop's private staff toilet.

"Ah, it's yourself, Elish. Come on in out of the rain."

"Thanks Mrs Carrigan."

"You'll be needing to use the staff toilet, just go through. You know where it is." El looked around at the other runners already huddled inside the bakery. Usually when she made her stop here it was empty, but the rain had driven the runners inside. Mrs Carrigan, waved off her silent enquiry. "Ah, sure, I'll let the rest of them use the loo if they need to, but after yourself, Elish."

"Thanks Mrs C, you're a gem."

Elish positioned herself as close as she could get to the elite runners in the sub 3 hours 30 minutes zone. She knew she wouldn't be keeping pace with the elite, but at the same time she

wanted to avoid the bottle neck that always happened as the rest of the field sorted itself out into a more realistic pattern of the fun runners and more serious amongst them.

The rain was still pouring down and Elish had yet to shed any of her layers. She would wait until the last few minutes then discard her outer layers never to see them again in all probability. Elish checked her wrist watch, when she pressed the appropriate button it would monitor her time, distance and heart rate, but right now it told her there were ten minutes till the start of the race, the butterfly's in her stomach were fluttering in accordance. Taking a few deep breaths to settle her pre race nerves, Elish began to take off her outer layers. Everything was easy to remove; her waterproof bottoms zipped fully up each outer leg, ensuring she wouldn't have to fumble with pulling the bottoms off over her training shoes. Her tracksuit bottoms had poppers for the same reason. Waterproofs removed, El waited just a couple of moments before shedding the final layer which would leave her in just the regulation shorts and vest for the long distance run. Elish looked around her at the runners who had taken off their outer layers some time ago, they already looked like drowned rats. The poor folks had probably removed their outer layers at the baggage area and walked the half-mile to the race start in shorts and T-shirts. She had been too focussed to take in the envious glances thrown her way, but she wasn't the only runner who had opted to shed their clothing late and be happy in the knowledge they would never see it again, preferring to stay warm and dry for as long as possible.

As the race start approached, El could feel the anticipatory buzz all around her. The miles that the runners had put in over the preceding months were coming to a head and the next few hours would let each individual know how well they had done. Some would be surprised, some disappointed, most just happy to reach the finish, but for the more serious amongst them, their enemy today would be the clock. It didn't matter what any other runner did, it was all about the time they would run, all hoping it would be an improvement on anything they had clocked before. To that end, El had her own personal goal for the race, she hadn't told anyone, despite the amount of pestering she had endured in the week leading up to the race. She knew the staff had bets on what time she would clock, with the closest guess winning the money. Naomi had been the worst offender when it came to trying to get Elish to state a time, she had even gone as far as offering to split the winnings with Elish. Not long know, the race starter was in position, a local celebrity who's name escaped her at that particular moment until he was introduced, then Elish briefly recalled that he was the guy who everyone's Granny loved and as far as El was concerned, was camp as Christmas, though apparently he had a *girlfriend* for the last twenty years. And with that thought, the wheelchair contestants were off. The first racers of the day starting five minutes ahead of the rest of the field, El watched them go, anticipating her own start.

After five miles Elish had settled into an easy rhythm and was feeling good despite the constant rain. She had overcome the initial instinct to follow the runners who started quickly. Despite her training, the instinct always kicked in making her own steady pace more difficult to ease into, she never encountered this problem running solo. Entering the scenic Phoenix Park, the crowds became sparser on this part of the route, allowing Elish to indulge in one of her favourite mental activities to help pass the time. El began singing pop songs in her head, if anyone knew she indulged in this cheesy activity she would never hear the end of it. This was the kind of music

more to the liking of her little nieces, the latest boy bands and girl groups lyrics ran with abandon through her head. *Yeah...everybody wants to know her na-a-a-ame!*

Leaving the park El's internal vocals were drowned out by a rousing beat from a drum band. Elish was close to approaching the 9-mile mark now, the first of her major markers and her time was looking good. She now found herself in with a group of runners all intent on the same goal as herself. She expected this and in truth welcomed the company and the added bonus of them helping pace each other, her plan for the next 9 miles was to stick with the main cluster of this group and assess how her body felt at 18 miles.

With the rain still pouring from the sky, El clung to the shouts of encouragement coming from the spectators who lined the Dublin streets. She occasionally heard her name being called and had spotted some friends along the route. All this served to lift her spirits and although she couldn't be completely sure, she could swear she heard a shout of "*Get a move on Boss!*"

Finally almost 90 minutes into the race the rain let up and the sun broke through the clouds, Elish welcomed the change in weather. Naomi was right, she had never been a fan of running in the rain, she was beginning to allow herself to believe for the first time that perhaps the omens were good and she would achieve her goal. Approaching the drinks station at the 15-mile point, Elish sensibly ran past the first few stations, to select her drink from one that would be less crowded. Unfortunately as she reached for her drink a guy who decided to throw running etiquette out the window bumped her into the table as he blindly reached for a drink of his own. El clattered into the station and the drinks went everywhere. She was still stunned when the volunteers who manned the station helped her to her feet as they enquired after her well-being. Gingerly stretching out her limbs, she took note of the grazes to her right knee and elbow, the blood starting to weep from the many tiny scrapes. Though stinging painfully, Elish was certain she could continue, knowing that stiffness to the injured areas would set in at the end of the race. She was certain that the best thing to do was get going as soon as possible. Waving off the St. John's ambulance people she got back onto the road amid applause from both the volunteers and spectators who had witnessed the incident.

El seemed to find a whole new dimension to her determination after that. Knowing she had lost out on almost 2 minutes totally pissed her off. Her focus to finish did not diminish and in a strange quirk of fate, the incident actually helped El's mental approach. Physically she hurt, but the pain in her knee superseded the usual race fatigue that crept into the latter stages of a long run. Normally El would have as big a battle with her body psychologically at these times, as she would with the physical demands. However, with the focus having shifted to her injuries, she had less time to dwell upon the other problems her body was complaining about.

For the last 3 miles Elish pounded the tarmac rhythmically, one foot in front of the other. She had continued to use the drink stations to avoid dehydration, but ran right past the final one. Approaching the last mile she caught and passed the now significantly smaller group she had been running with, this spurred her on again. She knew she was going to do it, and as Trinity College came back into view she knew the finish line was near, just a final loop around it and it

was all over.

Elish crossed the finish line, her arms aloft and a wide smile on her face. The unofficial time said 2 hours 59.02 seconds. Elish knew that when the official times were listed she would be even quicker than that. She had reached her goal and run under the magical three hour mark. She was now being ushered a certain way and she was more than happy to comply with whoever was leading her. A foil blanket had been placed over her shoulders and a bottle of water put into her hand. Her ChampionChip was removed from her shoe and a medal placed around her neck. It was all a blur, as next a T-shirt and race goody bag was put into her hands. She was then led over to an ambulance station to have her cuts attended to. What Elish was unaware of at that time was the replay of the incident at the water station had been shown several times on television and she was now a household name. Though Elish would admit only to herself later, after viewing the recording of the marathon that it did look pretty spectacular, and secretly she was pleased that her progress was followed on camera to update the viewers on how *the Dublin lass who was recklessly bumped by an overzealous runner* was faring.

After having her injuries treated and patched up, Elish made her way to Fitzwilliam Street to meet up with her friend's and family, and some warm clothing. She had placed eleventh in the women's race and was the fourth Irish woman home. This information had been fed to her as she received treatment from an older gentleman. That really was all she had managed to absorb, there was a lot of information being fed to her, but it all seemed so hazy. She was aware of some squeals and screams up ahead and then saw three of her nieces running towards her.

The older twins Gerry and Gheordan were waiting with their families, along with Naomi and Declan and Molly and Bren. Elish managed a smile at that; she thought she had heard Bren shouting during the race, now she knew she had. Mustering up the last of her energy she gave everyone a sweaty hug, before she was swept off to her Mam's for *Feeding up* and a special celebration that Mrs Maloney had planned.

"Are you alright?" was the frantic greeting Elish received from her Mam when she opened the door to her daughter.

"Of course I am, Mam. I finished the race."

"I know that, Elish," was the exasperated reply. "I saw what happened when that stupid oaf knocked you over the table full of drinks!"

"How do you know about that?"

Mrs Maloney rolled her eyes at her daughters naivety, "I watched the incident happen at least ten times on the television. Then I had to endure watching all the progress reports on my daughter as she ran around the streets of Dublin with her blood flowing down her leg and arm." Mrs Maloney grabbed her daughter in a tight embrace, "I swear you do these things on purpose."

El looked over her Mothers shoulder, a perplexed look upon her face. Her older brother

Gheordan laughed, shook his head then went into the sitting room.

"I'm proud of you." Was the emotional heartfelt statement that followed the reprimand.

"Thanks Mam. That means a lot."

"Now go and get yourself showered, then I can start putting some meat back on your bones, you're too thin Elish!"

"Yes, Mam."

Later that evening, as El soaked in her bathtub at home, she reminisced over the fantastic day she had experienced. She achieved her goal, despite the hiccup along the way. All in all she was very satisfied, if a little sore in a few places.

Two days later, El gingerly exited her Mondeo, hoping no one was watching her stilted progress. Despite her best efforts she was really paying the price for the big push she had made in the final miles of the Marathon. She didn't regret it for one moment though, the stiffness and pain would pass and her injuries would heal. The time she ran however, would remain.

Reaching back into the car for the battered leather briefcase she yanked the worn leather handle too hard and it snapped. El stood up and looked at the broken handle in her hand. She glanced down to the tarmac forlornly, knowing that her fatigued muscles were going to protest loudly when she bent to retrieve the body of her briefcase. Letting out a groan as she bent down she swore she heard a snicker. Looking across at the centre she saw several staff members grinning at her from the windows.

"Oh great. I just know those sadistic bastards are going to use every trick in the book to make me climb the stairs today!" El muttered a few curses under her breath and nearly jumped when Molly sidled up beside her.

"Morning Elish." The older woman's eyes betrayed the mirth that she was attempting to contain.

"Morning." El muttered.

Molly patted her back, "Congratulations again, Elish. You were amazing."

El grimaced as a muscle spasm chose that moment to appear, causing her hand to shoot to her lower back. "Thanks, Molly," She ground out through gritted teeth.

Molly looked concerned, "Perhaps you should have taken today off?"

"No, no. I'll be fine," Elish attempted a comforting smile, which ended up looking more like a grimace.

Molly was less than convinced, but decided Elish knew what she was doing.

"Good morning, Elish." Came the enthusiastic greeting from the new secretary, when she entered the building.

El bit back the tart reply trying to escape due to her discomfort. She was still trying to get used to Paul's sunny demeanour. He was the exact opposite of Bren in that respect. Paul was proving to be a good choice to replace Bren, despite the red hair. That had been the one bone of contention between them at the interview. Deep down El hoped that he would choose to change the colour to black.

"Morning Paul."

El entered her office and gingerly sat down. She glanced at the brown envelope on her desk, recognising the flowing scrawl on the front as belonging to Naomi. Opening the envelope El removed a clear plastic package that contained two large pills. Reading the post-it stuck to the plastic, everything became clearer.

Declan says if the pain becomes unbearable use one!

El looked suspiciously at the pills - *Jesus! What are they, for elephants!* Picking up the phone, she called Naomi.

"Naomi Connelly speaking."

"These pills."

"Yes."

"Is Doctor Declan sure? I mean - I don't think I could swallow a whole one." El pulled the phone away from her ear as Naomi's laughter burst through the receiver.

"What?"

"El, they are suppositories."

"What?"

"You know - you insert..."

El cut her friend off, "I know what you do Naomi - I just...well, I mean...ewww!"

"Oh, come on, I didn't realise you were such a prude."

"Yeah, like you would be happy to be sticking something up there." El was greeted with silence on the other end of the line.

"Naomi?" El could hear her friend clear her throat.

"Oh my God! You don't!"

"I'm not discussing my sex life with you, Elish."

"We have to talk."

"No, Elish." was Naomi's firm reply.

"Oh yes, we do." El replied in a singsong voice.

Hanging up the phone, El instantly felt a melancholy settle over her. Despite the playful banter with Naomi, she was having a miserable start to her day. That morning when she had went into Mrs F's cottage her older neighbour was up and dressed, feeding Tac and getting her own breakfast. In truth, El was extremely happy for her neighbour, seeing Mrs Fitzgibbon well on the road to recovery was wonderful, unfortunately, on a personal note for Elish, it gave her one less thing to focus on. With Mrs F no longer needing her, and her serious training over for now she was finding it difficult to keep her mind away from her own problems. Added to that, the briefcase her Father had given her upon graduating had just snapped. She was feeling utterly miserable now. Perhaps it was just post race blues, Elish briefly entertained that possibility, but deep down she knew it had more to do with a certain blonde who was no longer a part of her life.

Later that day El logged onto the Official Dublin Marathon website. She entered her race number to get her official race time. A few seconds later her time appeared as 2 hours fifty-eight minutes and 21 seconds. She was the Eleventh woman home and as she had been told, the fourth Irish woman to cross the finish line. Allowing herself to dwell for a moment on what might have been, she logged in to look at the top ten women, noting their times. Had she not had the collision, she might have placed Eighth in the women's standings and been the second Irish woman home. A top ten place would have been very nice indeed. Elish allowed herself to wallow in that for just a few moments, before putting it out of her head. "There's always next year." She whispered.

Over the following two weeks since the marathon, Elish found her mood had dipped considerably. There had been no progress made with regards to securing new premises locally for both the community and rehab centre. The School headmistress was still willing to enter into negotiations, but as with the original proposal, this would be for the community centre only. Added to that, El found herself with too much time to herself. With her focus no longer on the marathon, her mind had been given free rein to wander all too frequently towards thoughts of a

little blonde accountant who was no longer a part of her life. It wasn't like the brunette to wallow in self-pity and moon over someone no longer in her life, but on this occasion she felt absolutely helpless to prevent the recurring malaise she was experiencing. To this end, Elish found herself withdrawing steadily from any social activity, instead filling her time with the solo pursuit of running and work. Nothing else was filling up her diary at the moment. Despite many offers to have an evening out Elish repeatedly turned down each and every one of them, much to Naomi's consternation, this included their usual get together. She had thrown up her hands in defeat just two days earlier after storming into El's office to confront her about the new hermit lifestyle she had adopted, pointing out that the brunette no longer popped over to her office for coffee, something which was a frequent occurrence just weeks before.

Elish found herself spending yet another evening moping in front of the television. It was a Saturday; a night where she usually had something arranged somewhere. She was half watching some game show when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Elish, get yourself ready, the boys are on their way."

"What? Mam. No. I don't want to go out."

"You know you have no choice in the matter, Elish. I'm only calling you so you can pick your own clothes. You need to go out and have some fun. You've been sulking around too long."

El sighed, "Okay, Mam. Thanks for calling."

"And Elish? Behave yourself."

"I'll try Mam."

"Bye."

Elish sighed heavily as she set the phone back on its cradle. Her brothers hadn't wasted any time. They had probably been looking forward to this night for years. El had seen her share of break ups, but had never before exhibited the feelings of loss and heartbreak, that signalled the need for family intervention. She now had to endure the family tradition of a night on the town to get over your heartache. It was like a form of family therapy that involved a lot of drinking and other shenanigans. Elish was determined not to endure or get involved in the competitions that seemed to be a part of this evening. As she packed an overnight bag, another tradition since you never knew where you might end up, she vowed not to get too drunk, that way she could avoid future embarrassment.

El stood on her doorstep dressed in faded jeans and a black v-neck T-shirt. A pair of converse Hi-tops on her feet. Her overnight bag sat on the step next to her. She watched a white mini bus pull up in front of her gate, her oldest brother Gerry jumped out of the sliding door along with

Gheordan, his twin. They made their way up the path and gave Elish a quick once over.

"Oh, no, El. You can't wear that." Gerry said.

"Why?"

"The jeans and trainers have to go otherwise you will be refused entry into some of the bars in town." Gheordan added.

Oh great, El lamented, *they plan to hit the trendy nightspots*. She knew that complaining wouldn't work. Her brothers would just frog march her up to her bedroom and pick out what they thought was appropriate attire for the evening. "Fine, give me a minute to change," she huffed. They smiled, knowing she would see sense. El reappeared a few minutes later dressed in black hipster trousers, a black sleeveless mandarin collar top and a pair of black dress boots. To anyone else, El was a beautiful woman, with curves in all the right places, dressed to kill. To her brothers, she was simply El, with some pretty clothes on. They nodded to each other; she had passed inspection and was ready for her night out.

Getting into the minibus she received enthusiastic greetings from her brothers, while her nasal passages were assaulted by the pungent whiff of the many brands of aftershave being worn. As soon as everyone was seated, the younger twins pulled a box of designer lager from under their seats, opened the bottles and started passing them around. As far as El was concerned, this was a bad sign. The boys obviously meant business. All the bottles were clanked together in a group salute, before being consumed by a bunch of men with a thirst to quench. El's attempt at sipping her drink was met by a barrage of good-natured ribbing and outright abuse from others. They all knew her weaknesses, she wouldn't stand for being called a girly and the taunts of, *"Did we bring along some Babycham for Elish?"* She downed her lager, with a renewed purpose, she would match them all evening, all thoughts of tomorrow fled her mind as she focussed on giving as good as she got, no way would she be seen as a wimp amongst this lot. She would never live it down!

Sure enough, the first bar they hit was one of the trendiest in town, with a queue already formed outside waiting for entrance. The Maloney posse led by Jimmy, the designated driver for the evening, and a friend of Gerry's, walked right up to the two doormen and were immediately granted entrance, much to the disgruntlement of some of the folks in the queue. Elish had a feeling there would be no queuing anywhere this evening. Her brothers knew folks all over town, probably more than half the bouncers working in Dublin tonight. Some of them had worked the doors on occasion; she wondered what the extent of their involvement was. She had never enquired as to why they sometimes worked as bouncers for the evening.

Elish watched as her older brother John stood at the door talking to the doormen for a few moments, shaking their hands before making his way into the bar. Something about the exchange peaked her interest.

El intercepted John on his way to join the rest of his brothers. "What line of work are you in?"

John grinned at her, "This and that."

"Would this and that include running a business that hired out doormen all over Dublin?"

"That's what I like about you, Elish. You always were smart. You figured it out the first opportunity you got."

El pouted, "You've never asked me to be a bouncer."

"You want to play at being a bouncer for an evening, El, you just give me a call." He motioned his head towards the group of men all broad shouldered and in excess of 6 ft tall. "I call them up when I'm short, the Bastards hold me to ransom though. They know I'm desperate and negotiate an outrageous fee for the evening."

El laughed, "I can imagine."

John put his arm around his sister's waist and led her towards the group, "You can see why I'm a bit vague with the details in front of Mam, she wouldn't approve of certain aspects of the job."

El knew John was right. You didn't get to run a company that supplied muscle to the pubs and clubs of Dublin without treading on a few toes, and you always had to watch your back. It was a dangerous business to be in.

"Don't worry, Johnny, your secret's safe with me."

Another round and another bar, Elish was really feeling the buzz of the alcohol. The evening was proving to be fun, filled with laughter and jokes. Then came the challenge, Elish had forgotten about that games they played until that moment. She had been enjoying the evening and allowed herself to fall into a comfortable haze.

"How many woman are you going to kiss tonight, Elish?" This from Danny, the baby of the family.

El, had passed the point where she could have made the decision logically. There always seemed to be a point in any evening when she was drinking alcohol, where she knew she had reached her limit and either went home, or switched to soft drinks. This particular night, she had no idea when that point had come and gone, all she was certain of was that it had passed. Shrugging her shoulders, she accepted the challenge. "What's the record?"

Tim answered her, "It's twelve and I hold the record."

She could hear the hint of challenge in his voice, almost defying her to beat him.

El smiled sweetly, "Must be the blue eyes." There was a definite twinkle in her own.

"Right." Was the forced reply.

El decided that there was no time like the present to start attempting the record. She may have been drunk, but she was aware of the looks she had been receiving from a tall blonde woman. El sauntered over to her. "You have lovely long eye lashes. Could you close your eyes a moment so that I can get a good look at them?" The woman raised a shaped eyebrow, before smiling playfully. The stranger was more than happy to oblige. She knew what was coming.

"Sure," was the purred reply.

When the stranger closed her eyes, El placed a soft lingering kiss on her full lips. She pulled back a little, awaiting the stranger's response. "Hmm, is that all you've got?"

That was all the encouragement El needed, this time she kissed the woman properly.

Her brothers watched on with mixed feelings.

Gheordan turned to Gerry, "You know normally I would find that really hot, but when it's your own sister..."

"I hear you brother." They both gave a mock shudder then laughed at the strange moment.

Tim looked on with thinly veiled disgust. "Does that not just turn your stomach?"

John turned to his brother, not believing what he had just heard. "For God's sake, Tim, there's no harm."

"So you think that's okay?"

"Of course I do."

"Not to me, it's unnatural."

John moved in close to his brother, intending his next words for Tim only. "You know what I think? You need to get over yourself. You're letting an incident that happened when you were both teenagers cloud your judgement and affect you as a grown man. You need to move out of her shadow and live for yourself. Letting that fester away and competing with Elish is a bad idea. Face it, Tim; our sister is a very talented woman. You need to stop brooding and let it go. You can't keep using Elish as an excuse for all the times you act like a prick."

Tim glared at John, then turned away when he was met with a steady unflinching gaze. He had always assumed he had an ally in John, obviously he had misjudged him.

The evening was becoming a blur to Elish, another bar, another drink and another attempt to kiss a woman. She hadn't done too badly so far, with a score of five kisses and a proposition from a husband and wife to spend the night with them. Elish had politely declined that one.

Tim couldn't resist having a dig at his sister, "You know, Elish, I thought you would have done much better with the ladies."

"Yeah? I think I'm doing pretty well considering the odds are stacked against me."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, *Timmy*, this for me is the equivalent of you going to lesbian bars and attempting to find a woman who will kiss you." Tim had been pissing her off throughout the evening with his comments, she decided to go for broke and break his record and she knew just the place where she could do that.

"So what? You want us all to go to a lesbian bar?" He asked, disbelief colouring his voice.

El shrugged, "If the competition is to be fair, that's what we'll have to do."

"I'm game." This comment came from John, and the rest of the brothers agreed."

"Will we get in?" Tim asked.

"Sure we will, I do the door at *The Front Lounge*, we won't have any problem getting in there." John gave his sister a wink; she had asked him earlier if he worked for any of the gay bars in town.

The night was getting on and Elish could feel herself wilting. She had lost count of the women she had kissed in the Lounge, her brothers had been pretty cool about the change of venue, especially the twins, Tommy and Danny, who had managed to hook up with women in a gay bar and were feeling pretty proud of themselves. Standing in line for the toilet, Elish spotted a friendly face.

"Hi, Emma?" El hoped her voice didn't sound slurred, she had only met the woman a couple of times.

"Elish, fancy seeing you here."

"Don't tell me it's a surprise?"

"Naw, not really." They shared a laugh. Emma continued, "I was just about to head home, but it was nice seeing you."

"Hang on Emma." A plan was forming in her alcohol-fogged brain. "How are you getting

home?"

"Wait at the taxi rank, I suppose. I won't walk when I'm on my own."

"How would you like a lift home?"

"Elish, don't take this the wrong way, but you don't look like you're in a fit state to drive."

Elish used exaggerated hand gestures, "Oh, no, I'm not driving. Jimmy is, he's a pal of my brothers, though to how many of them I don't know." El giggled and Emma gave her a strange look.

"Honest, look, my brothers took me out tonight, long story, but I split up with my girlfriend, so this is to cheer me up."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, Elish."

El nodded, "Me too." She paused for a moment, seemingly lost in thought, Emma could see that Elish was genuinely hurt over the break up. When those sad blue eyes looked at her, she felt the urge to help take the pain away.

"Will you help me, Emma?"

"Tell me what you need."

El smiled, "I need you to get me home, I trust you, cause I know you're good at getting people home."

"I can do that." The OT smiled.

El put a long finger to her lips, "Shhh, that bits a secret. You don't mind if my brothers think we are leaving together, do you? See, they expect me to leave with a beautiful woman, but I don't really want to, so we could just give them the impression that I'm leaving with a beautiful woman. You are, you know...beautiful"

Emma laughed, "Come on, Elish, let's give your brothers a show."

The pair left the bathroom arm in arm, in search of their driver.

"Jimmy, can you give us a lift?"

The burly mans eyes widened as he looked at the two women. "Sure, Elish, now?"

"Yes, we're ready to go." She grinned at Emma, who gave her a playful peck on the lips.

Elish said her goodbyes to her brother's then led Emma out of the bar to the mini bus."

"Where to, Elish?"

"My Mam's, Jimmy."

"Huh?"

"Yeah, can you drop me at my Mam's, then drop Emma at her house?"

Jimmy smiled at the pair, realising what was happening, "Sure thing, and your secrets safe with me."

"Thanks, Jimmy."

Emma walked Elish to her Mam's front door, while Jimmy waited in the bus to take Emma home. The tall brunette was struggling to get her key in the lock when suddenly a frowning Marie Maloney opened the door. She took one look at her grinning daughter and rolled her eyes.

"Mam!" El hugged her mother enthusiastically. She let go and gestured towards Emma, "Meet Emma, she came home with me."

Mrs Maloney gave her daughter a stern look, they all knew she wouldn't stand for that kind of thing under her roof.

"It's her job, Mam."

"What!" Marie Maloney looked ready to explode.

Emma felt it was time to step in and help explain the situation. "Ah, Mrs Maloney. I'm Emma Hughes, an Occupational Therapist. I met Elish when she came to visit a patient."

"She's great, Mam, she got Mrs F all sorted out and brought her home." El gave Emma a goofy smile.

"Oh, well that's good. You did a wonderful job dear, Mrs Fitzgibbon has high praise for all the staff at the hospital."

"That's nice to hear." Emma lingered just a moment longer, "I, ah, should get going. Jimmy is giving me a lift home."

"Oh, okay, it was great to see you again, Emma." El replied, temporarily forgetting that Emma was leaving.

The OT smiled, "You too, Elish, take care of yourself."

"Thank you, Emma, for making sure my drunken daughter made it home safely."

"It was my pleasure."

El, winked conspiratorially at the blonde, well she attempted to anyway, Emma thought the tall woman had something in her eye. "I don't normally get drunk."

"Well, thank goodness that much is true." Mrs Maloney added dryly.

"Goodnight." Emma waved as she walked back down the garden path to the mini bus.

"She's a lovely girl." Mrs Maloney remarked, "You on the other hand are a very drunk girl. Let's get you to bed, Elish."

"I'm the champion, Mam. I kissed the most girls."

"I don't want to know this." Her Mam warned.

They reached the top of the stairs, Elish hovering precariously on the top step, until Mrs Maloney guided her towards the guest bedroom, El's overnight bag in her hand.

Elish sat on the bed while her Mam put the lamp on, she began to unzip her ankle boots, struggling to pull them of.

"Here, let me. You'll be at that all night."

"Thanks, Mam." El pulled her top over her head, leaving her upper body clad in a black bra. She began to undo her trousers, as her Mam rummaged through the overnight bag, looking for the items her inebriated daughter would need. Finding a T-shirt and shorts among the clothing, she removed them and set them on the bed next to Elish. Next she found a soap bag. Turning to her daughter who was now in her underwear, Mrs Maloney handed El her soap bag.

"Your night clothes are there on the bed, put them on, then go to the bathroom, and take your soap bag with you. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Mrs Maloney returned to find Elish ready for bed, her breath smelling of mint toothpaste. Pulling back the duvet, she motioned for her daughter to get into bed.

"I brought you up a glass of water, it might help you feel less hung-over tomorrow if you drink it."

"Thanks, Mam."

Marie Maloney took a seat on the edge of the bed. She watched as her daughter drank some of the water before putting her head on the pillow. The urge to smooth back the long silky dark

strands was too strong to resist. Marie Maloney knew her daughter was going through a rough patch in her life and was glad to be able to offer some comfort.

El sighed as her mother ran her hands through her hair. It felt good. She let out a long slow breath. "I miss her, Mam."

"I know, Elish."

"She hasn't been in touch, she didn't return any of my phone calls. I can't contact her now, because she changed her number. It wasn't meant to be I suppose, we were just too different."

"How do you mean, Elish?"

El's brow furrowed as she concentrated hard on forming her answer. "See Aisling, she is strawberries and cream and I'm tinned fruit and ice-cream." El paused for a moment, "I'm cheese and wine and she's champagne and canapés. You see?"

"I think so, Elish."

El smiled, "I knew you would - see, you and Aisling have that in common."

Mrs Maloney was having trouble following her daughter's train of thought. "What's that?"

"Food." El declared. "You love to cook it and she loves to eat it. I knew you would understand, Mam." El closed her eyes and Mrs Maloney thought she had drifted off to sleep. She looked fondly at her daughter, thinking what a wonderful woman she had turned out to be and knowing El's father would have been very proud of his daughter. Suddenly El spoke, startling her.

"I'm sorry, Mam. I'm sorry I didn't turn out the way you wanted."

Marie Maloney looked on as a tear leaked from the side of her daughters eye.

"Oh, Elish." She gasped, "I don't regret a thing about you, Elish Maloney. Had you turned out the way I had wanted you to, I'm sure you would be miserable and possibly even stifled. I got over that a long time ago. I love you exactly the way you are."

"Really?" El's voice sounded so small and uncertain.

"Truly, Elish. Please believe me."

El nodded, "I do."

"And believe me when I say that I would give anything to see you happy right now. You deserve happiness, Elish, and if Aisling can give you that, I hope that the two of you can reconcile your differences and get back together."

"I hope so too. I fell in love with her, Mam and I never got to tell her."

"I hope you get the chance, Elish. I really do."

"I love you, Mam."

Within moments, Elish was sound asleep. Marie Maloney placed a kiss on her daughter's head before making her way to her own bedroom.

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~ Conflict Of Interests ~

by Weebod

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

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

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

Part Seven:

"What the ...?" Elish reached blindly for the phone that sat on the bedside table. "Hello?" she asked fumbling for the switch on the lamp next to her wondering who on earth could be calling at whatever hour it was.

"Can I speak to Elish Maloney please?" Came the official sounding male voice.

"Speaking," El replied groggily as she located the lamp switch, a quick glance at her watch told her it was a little after 2am.

"This is Garda McKenna. We need to locate a key holder for the premises at Kerry Street. I'm

afraid there has been a break in."

God damn it! El thought to herself, this was all she needed. "Have you tried the caretaker, Mr Mullins?"

"I haven't been able to get hold of him, you were next on the list."

El sighed, as she rubbed her eyes, "I'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

Getting out of her warm comfortable bed, she went to the bathroom to quickly freshen up, and then threw on some clean underwear, a T-Shirt, along with a sweatshirt and bottoms. Heading downstairs she put on the first pair of training shoes she could find, then grabbed a warm padded jacket. Lifting her house keys and car keys, she left the cottage arriving almost fifteen minutes later at the community centre.

Exiting her car, El made her way over to the two Gardai officers at the scene. She could see the damage to one of the windows as she approached. It had been smashed in to allow the robbers entry.

"Hi there, I'm Elish Maloney."

"Ms Maloney, I'm Garda McKenna and this is my partner, Garda Brown." They exchanged nods, then Garda McKenna proceeded to inform Elish of what they knew.

"So it seems they may have been disturbed before they were able to get into the building, but we need you to go in with us, and take a look around."

Ten minutes later, a relieved Elish exited the building with Garda McKenna, the burglars had indeed been disturbed and ran off before they were able to steal equipment, or do any further damage. Now Elish had the boring job of waiting around for an emergency joiner to come and board up the broken window.

As the Gardai finished up with their part of the proceedings, Elish saw headlights enter the car park and assumed the joiner had arrived. As the car got closer she knew that wasn't the case, unless the joiner was driving a top of the range black Mercedes. She watched on curiously as James Keenan locked his car door and cautiously made his way over to her, his black leather soled brogues struggling to gain traction on the frosty tarmac. Part of El wished he would slip and fall on his arse.

"Good morning, Ms Maloney." He greeted politely, his warm breath crystallising in the cold early morning air.

"Mr Keenan." El replied curtly.

James Keenan looked over to where the officers were standing, "So what's the damage?"

"Just a broken window, the burglars were disturbed before they could enter the building."

"Good, good. I'm glad to hear nothing has been taken." James Keenan pursed his lips, as he seemed to consider what to say next. El stood with her hands in her pockets, maintaining her silence. She had no idea why he was here, she wasn't sure if this was standard practice for him to turn up when one of his buildings was broken into.

"I hear you ran the marathon," he enquired conversationally.

That most definitely threw El completely. The last thing she expected from this man was small talk.

"Yes, running is my hobby."

"A very respectable time you did too."

"I was pleased with it."

The man nodded, not making eye contact with her as he looked out over the car park. El took in his attire; he certainly didn't look like he had just fallen out of bed, as she herself had. The man was dressed in a dark suit, with a heavy dark grey over coat covering it to ward off the late November chill. She watched as he blew out a breath, it billowed and then rapidly disappeared into the cold night air. He finally turned to look at her. "Have you heard from my daughter?"

"No." The simple one word reply hung in the air between them.

"Maybe you should give her a call?" he suggested.

El's eyes narrowed to slits as she wondered just what his game was. First he pulls out of a deal that would have given her and her staff new premises to work from because she was seeing his daughter and now he was standing here making small talk and encouraging her to call Aisling.

"I tried calling, Aisling hasn't answered any of my calls." El maintained eye contact with James Keenan, but he couldn't return the favour. He ducked his head to look at his shoes, before looking back up at her.

"I see."

Elish said nothing. She didn't have anything to say.

"Well, I better be getting home. Are you leaving too?"

"I have to wait on the joiner."

"Oh, of course ... well, good night, Ms Maloney."

"Mr Keenan." El nodded.

She watched as the man got back into his car preparing to drive off into the night, curious when after a minute he got back out of his car and walked over to her.

"I hope this is of some use to you." He handed her a business card, then walked back to his car, this time driving off without a moment's hesitation.

El, looked down at the business card, it gave the contact details for James Keenan. Out of curiosity she flipped it over and found an Edinburgh address printed in neat handwriting on the back.

Elish had found his behaviour puzzling, but she couldn't trust the weasel. Shrugging off the unusual feelings that the conversation and the hand-written address stirred in her, she walked back over to the Gardai. She didn't want to consider the fact that James Keenan actually gave her the slightest sliver of hope. It didn't sit well with her.

Thursday morning, Elish sat at her desk, no work getting done as she stared at the card James Keenan had handed her the night before. She already knew the address; it was imprinted on her brain. This surely meant Aisling was in Edinburgh, probably with Aiden. That would make sense. On impulse, Elish picked up the phone calling directory enquiries. There was no telephone number listed for that address. She put the phone down, *what now?* She asked herself. Removing her reading glasses she rubbed the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger. *This is madness*, she cautioned, but it didn't stop her pulling up the flight times from Dublin to Edinburgh on her desktop computer.

El looked at the flight available for tomorrow. Leaving Dublin airport at 13.10 to arrive in Edinburgh a mere one hour later. Should she? Could she? Elish chewed on the end of the arm of her glasses, *Fuck it! What have I got to lose?* Putting her glasses back on, she made the booking, then sat back, shocked at her own impulsiveness. One minute later she was looking up hotels in Edinburgh close to the address she had been given.

Not surprisingly, the address was near to Edinburgh University. Elish found a reasonably priced hotel less than a mile away, there were a lot to choose from, as it was right in the centre of town. *Oh, well, at least I can sightsee for a few days, if nothing else.* Though El seriously doubted she would feel like it if this hastily planned trip turned out to be fruitless. Slumping back in her chair slightly dazed, she considered what else needed to be done before she left. *Now I just have to sort things out here and head off on my last minute holiday without too many questions.* Reaching for the telephone, she set about the task of cancelling everything on her schedule for tomorrow and the following week.

El watched as her trolley case approached on the conveyor belt, lifting it, she set the wheels down and pulled the handle up. Packing had been easy, the climate here was pretty much the same as in Dublin, now Elish had to get into the city centre. Spotting the signs for the taxi rank and the airport bus, she exited the terminal. Noting that a bus was waiting El thought, *what the hell, it's been ages since I used public transport.*

El, lifted her case onto the bus, her hand luggage which was a small rucksack, sat securely on her back.

"Do you go anywhere near The Bank Hotel?"

The bus driver looked at Elish, he was smartly dressed in a crisp white shirt, with a burgundy tie and tank top. "I do, I can take you right to the Waverley train station. That's the very last stop. From there, The Bank Hotel is a short walk up Cockburn Street."

That sounded pretty good to El. "How much?"

"Three pounds one way, or five pounds return."

El's eyes widened, not at the cost, but at her oversight. She had forgotten the currency change. "I've only got euros."

"Ah, sorry hen, I can only take pounds. You can swap your money inside the airport, but you'll miss the bus, I'm due to leave in five minutes."

"Okay. How long till the next bus?"

"Ten minutes, but hang on a sec." The driver opened the door to his cab, "Can anyone help this young woman? She doesn't have any pounds yet, only euros." Some folks started to look through their pockets. "Have you got five euros there? That should do for three pounds."

"Elish hastily checked her wallet and found a €5 note. A guy in his early twenties stepped forward with three-pound coins, El handed him the euros and thanked him. Smiling at the driver she waited until he got back into his seat then paid her fare. "Thanks so much."

"You're welcome. There's a Post office on the way to your hotel. Pop in there and they will exchange your Euros at no charge."

El smiled again, "Will do." El went to take a seat, but stopped when the driver spoke again.

"Oh, and hen, remember to swap them back again when you go home." Laughing he started up the double Decker bus to begin the journey into the city centre.

Exiting the bus with thanks to the driver, El made her way up the street he pointed out. Sure

enough she found the Post Office, Euros changed to pounds she continued to the top of the street and easily located The Bank Hotel on the opposite side of a busy junction.

Once inside her hotel room, El was immediately struck by its gothic like appearance. The walls were panelled with dark oak, giving them an almost black appearance in the muted light of a late winter afternoon. A large double bed, covered by navy bedding, sat proudly against one wall, flanked by two floor to ceiling windows. A cream carpet covered the floor. The room was spacious, bigger than El expected. Reasonably happy with her choice of accommodation, she settled in for the evening. Elish had developed a case of cold feet and decided that tomorrow would be the best day to visit Aisling.

Elish walked along Rankeillor Street. It hadn't been too difficult to find, which El was grateful for, considering she was in a strange city. She looked at the town houses lining this wide street. Noting the numbers as she went, she crossed over to the other side where the door numbers were odd. Elish found herself standing before a bright red door. This was it. Swallowing hard she depressed the doorbell and waited. Hearing footsteps approaching the door from inside, El's heart rate picked up significantly. The door opened and a man in his early twenties stood before her. El could see the resemblance to Aisling, the hair was the same colour, but not the eyes, they were hazel. He stood waiting expectantly.

"Ah, I'm looking for Aisling Keenan."

"Who are you?"

"Elish Maloney."

There was a long pause before the young man spoke again, "You better come in, Aisling is out shopping."

Elish was led through a tiled foyer into a carpeted hall. Then through a door immediately to her right, which led to a front sitting room. The blonde man, who she assumed was Aiden, took a seat in a brown leather armchair. Elish quickly looked around the room and chose to sit on the leather sofa, which ran along an inner wall.

Elish waited for Aiden to speak, but he kept his silence. She felt a little uncomfortable sitting here with this stranger who was just staring out the window. She looked longingly at the television in the corner, wishing it were switched on. Anything for a distraction. The silence was unnerving.

"He likes you, you know."

Elish looked at the stranger sitting across the room. Knowing Aiden suffered from schizophrenia she couldn't help but wonder whom the 'he', Aiden had referred to could be?

"Don't worry, I'm referring to my father - not any personalities popping out to meet you." Aiden

looked at El without any trace of emotion showing on his face.

The brunette wasn't sure what unnerved her more, the silence or the way Aiden seemed to read her thoughts. She decided the only way was to be herself. "I can't say I like him much - I'm surprised to hear he has the ability to like anyone."

Aiden laughed, then just as quickly as it had started, it ended abruptly. "I like your honesty," he turned serious again, "I hate deceitfulness, I have no time for it - it agitates me."

El nodded her understanding and they once again sat in silence, the only sound permeating the room was the passing cars. El looked around the room, it was spacious, she assumed that all of the flat would be, it seemed too big for just one person.

"I had flatmates - they moved out."

El nodded, again feeling a little unnerved by Aiden's perceptiveness. She looked at him, trying to read something from him, again there was no emotion showing in his face. He sat still, his posture rigid, appearing as though it were impossible for him to relax.

"Have you considered getting new ones?"

"I've found that it's difficult to find people who are willing to share a flat with a paranoid schizophrenic. Frankly, anyone who is willing gives me cause for concern and I'm the nutter. I find it's easier to live alone, I enjoy the silence."

Again all El could do was nod, "What about Aisling, is she living here with you?"

"For the time being. Even if she chooses not to return to Dublin," Aiden paused a moment, "He wants that, you know, she won't be staying around here for much longer - in this flat anyway."

El was puzzled, not quite following Aiden's meaning. Again, Aiden answered her unspoken question.

"It's no life, living with me full-time."

"I think Aisling might disagree," Elish countered.

"I'm positive she would." The answer was again direct and to the point, "But I would never allow her to." Aiden looked intensely at El, "That's why I invited you in."

"What will you do if she leaves?"

Stay in Edinburgh for now, either here or at the unit. I won't be heading home just because my father decides to finally show some interest. I won't go where I'm not wanted."

"Maybe he really wants to build a relationship with you?" El offered encouragingly.

"Then he knows where I am - but I never saw my Mother with him. Have you met her?"

El shook her head, "No."

Aiden looked past Elish, seemingly lost in thought. A key turning in the door prevented any further conversation.

El sat frozen in place. Time seemed to slow as she waited with baited breath for Aisling to appear. The front door closed accompanied by the sound of rustling shopping bags. The clatter of footsteps on the tiled foyer floor, then nothing as the hall carpet muted them. The squeak of a floorboard outside the sitting room door had El swallowing nervously. There was more rustling of bags as Aisling entered the sitting room, a smile on her face for Aiden. Walking towards her brother, Aisling dropped her shopping with a relieved exhalation of breath and removed her scarf. El noted how her cheeks were flushed pink from the cold, she looked radiant.

"Phew, the town was mobbed. I should know better than to shop on a Saturday." She smiled at Aiden as she removed her long wool coat, her brother had yet to utter a word.

"Aiden?"

The young man simply nodded towards the sofa where a very nervous Elish sat expectantly.

Turning to El, the smile slid from the blonde's face, look of disbelief quickly engulfing her features. "Elish?"

El hesitantly got to her feet, not sure what to do or say now that Aisling was in front of her, all El could think was that it had been too long and Aisling looked better than ever.

"Why are you here, Elish?"

The sharpness in the blonde's tone startled her, though she could hardly blame Aisling. "I, ah...your father, he gave me the address."

"Look, there was no need for you to travel here, he should have told you that. I'm signing the new buildings over the community. We may be over, but I still want to see the community continue to thrive."

El was stunned, she had no idea what Aisling was talking about, she shook her head, at a loss to make sense of the turn in conversation.

"If that's all, you can go now."

El noticed that Aiden had left the room sometime during his sister's tirade. They were now alone. "Aisling, truly I have no idea what you are talking about."

The accountant frowned, "Then why are you here?"

"I'm here because I wanted to see you. Nothing to do with work, I just had to see you." El thrust her hands into the pockets of her jeans in an attempt to stop clenching and unclenching them. She focused intently on her former lover, "I'm here because I lost the best thing that ever happened to me. I reacted without thinking things through; I should have given you a chance to explain. I should have trusted you, but I was too busy being angry to take the time to listen."

"Yes, you were." Aisling stated flatly.

The silence hung heavy in the air between them, until Elish broke it.

"I want to apologise to you, Aisling. I am so very sorry for the way I treated you."

Aisling nodded her acceptance, but remained quiet.

Elish removed her hands from her pocket only to run nervous fingers through her hair, all she wanted to do in that moment was take Aisling in her arms. "Can I take you to dinner...tonight?"

Aisling blinked her surprise, "Oh, I...I can't." She dipped her eyes to the floor then looked back to Elish. "I have a date," she said softly.

Elish was so devastated by this news she could feel tears spring to her eyes. Aisling didn't miss the crestfallen look that washed over the brunette. Elish couldn't wait to make her escape.

"I see...well, anyway, I better get going."

"Don't you want to know about the centre?"

Not at that moment she didn't, she just wanted to escape so she could be alone. Swiping angrily at the tear leaking from the corner of her eye, El tried to remain composed enough to reply.

"Maybe, ah...maybe you could send a letter to the centre?"

El's look was almost pleading and it was all Aisling could do to resist the urge to go to her and wipe the tears from her eyes. "Sure, Elish," she nodded. "I'll put it in writing."

"Thank you," was the quiet reply. El swallowed the lump in her throat, "Goodbye, Aisling."

Aisling stood frozen to the spot as she watched Elish walk to the front door. "Elish."

The brunette stopped dead in her tracks, but didn't dare look back. "Yes?"

"How long are you here for?"

El turned to the side, "Just a few days, I fly back Thursday." She paused, "I might get an earlier

flight..." El replied, shrugging, what more was there to say?

The blonde nodded, "Take care of yourself, Elish."

Offering a sad smile, the brunette turned to face Aisling, "You too." El reached the front door, opened it and never looked back. She walked straight into the darkening November night with her tears running down her cheeks, this time she didn't bother to wipe them.

El lay on the hotel bed. She had showered and put on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. Everything since closing the door at the house on Rankeillor Street had been a blur. The television was off and the book she had been reading the night before lay on the bedside table untouched, El's glasses lying on top of it. Elish had risked everything on a whim and lost. Aisling had moved on, and she now knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she had lost the best thing to ever happen to her and that knowledge caused an ache in her chest unlike anything she had ever experienced in a relationship before. Lying flat on her back, hands behind her head, one ankle crossed over the other, she stared hopelessly at the ceiling as she listened to the sounds of revellers on a Saturday night.

Unsure how long she had been staring, unmoving, lost in her thoughts, El got up from the bed and crossed over to the large window, which looked down onto the main street. Leaning against the wall, El casually observed the activity going on in the cobbled street below. Guys singing, girls shrieking, Hen parties, Stag parties. The pub across the road was busy, as would be the hotel bar. Elish sighed, watching people enjoying themselves seemed to compound her own sadness. She considered that she hadn't eaten since lunchtime and knew that she should, but found herself unable to seriously entertain the thought of food. Instead El decided to try and get some sleep; tomorrow she would change her scheduled flight and take the earliest available back to Dublin.

Elish was awoken some time later by the ringing of the hotel phone. "Hello?"

"Miss Maloney, sorry to disturb you at this hour but we have an Aisling Keenan at the front desk. She would like to see you?"

El blinked in surprise, Aisling was downstairs? "Ah, yes, send her up."

"Right away, Miss Maloney."

Putting the phone back on its cradle, El sat up in bed and ran nervous fingers through her hair. *Why was Aisling here?* She glanced at the clock, *at 1.22am, in the morning!* Getting out of bed intent on putting on some clothing, her progress was halted by a knock at the door. Taking a deep breath, she walked over to the door and opened it; Aisling was standing on the other side looking... El frowned, Aisling looked mad! Yes, El thought, she definitely looked angry.

The angry blonde pointed a finger at El, "You have ruined me for anyone else, Elish Maloney!"

El blinked staring at the irate woman before her. "I have?"

"Yes!" Aisling's nostrils flared as she looked pointedly at El. "What do you intend to do about it?" she demanded.

El's eyes widened with surprise at the unusual circumstances she suddenly found herself in. Here she was standing in a hotel room doorway in Scotland, with the woman she had fallen in love with, then sent away, then tried to get back only to find out she was too late, standing in front of her demanding to know what she was going to do about ruining her for anyone else! Life could be very strange indeed.

"Would you like to come in?" El enquired politely.

Aisling rolled her eyes and walked past her into the room.

Closing the door, El tentatively approached her former lover, only to have the blonde whirl on her, "I had dinner tonight with an attractive, witty, intelligent woman and all I could think about was you!" Again a finger pointed angrily at Elish.

El wondered if this was actually an insult. It certainly sounded like one. Whatever it was, she didn't care, Aisling was here and that must mean something. Aisling was thinking about her that had to be good, well unless these thoughts involved sharp objects. A slow smile started to cover El's mouth.

"Don't you dare smirk! Don't you dare!" There was a pause before Aisling added, "And you can pay off my phone bill - Have you any idea how many hotels I called tonight!?"

El immediately held up her hands in surrender, mumbling an apology.

"You turn up in Edinburgh completely out of the blue, making some grand gesture to win me back. You sent me away, Elish! You told me you didn't need me. What's changed?"

"Everything." El implored, "My life just isn't the same without you in it. It's empty."

Aisling continued to glare at her as El attempted to straighten her face, it was proving difficult to stop the smile that wanted to break out.

"We need to talk, so start talking!" Aisling demanded as she removed her heavy winter coat.

El cautiously approached the irate blonde. She had never seen Aisling angry, the woman was always so composed and relaxed. Elish took a seat on the edge of her bed, leaving the blonde standing, her arms folded across her chest, posture rigid. El took a moment to think about what she wanted to say, not sure where to start, she decided to tell Aisling how she came to be in Edinburgh.

"When your father gave me the address, I decided to take a chance. I want you back in my life, but you won't answer my calls, so knowing you were probably here, I came to see you, I miss you, I want you back."

"You hurt me."

"I know, and I am so very sorry for that." El looked right into Aisling's eyes. "I have never felt this way before, Aisling. I am miserable without you."

Aisling took a deep breath and nodded, "I hope you have been *really* miserable, because I certainly have."

"Trust me, I have." There was silence between them as neither was sure what to say or do next; El decided it was up to her to make the next move. "Will you stay a little while?" she asked tentatively.

Aisling nodded her agreement to the suggestion; relaxing her body just a little, she took a seat in the chair by the window.

There was silence between them for a few moments before El broke it with a question that had been bugging her ever since that fateful day when James Keenan had informed everyone they had six months left on their lease.

"Why didn't you tell me what your father had planned?"

Aisling sighed, "I couldn't, I worked for him. It would have been unethical to inform you of his plans..."

Elish was about to interrupt, but Aisling held up a hand to stop her. "Let me finish," she requested gently. At El's nod she continued.

"I knew from the start that the land and buildings on it were to be sold. In truth at the beginning it was a numbers job for me, but as I began to learn more about what went on in the buildings, I started to see things differently." Aisling paused, shaking her head, "And after that day you gave me the tour, I *knew* I had to do something to help. I could see how vital the centre was to the community. I didn't want to be a part of ripping out its heart." Aisling smiled at El, "I remember you asking me that day, if I might want to participate in something the centre offered or to volunteer. I knew then that I would do all I could to keep the centre open. I couldn't tell you anything, but after that visit I immediately set about looking at ways to do just that. When I wrote a clause into the contract for the land and the Supermarket chain agreed to it, I was sure I had found the answer." Aisling paused again, looking at El intently. "Don't get me wrong, I was still nervous, I watched as you went about your job, completely unaware of what was ahead of you...that was so hard, Elish," the blonde finished in a whisper. "You have no idea the amount of times I wanted to just blurt out everything that was going on behind the scenes. I bit my tongue and prayed that come the day when my father made his announcement, there would be good

news for both yourself and Naomi." Aisling laughed bitterly, 'I imagined that day going so differently to how it turned out.' Aisling stopped seemingly lost in the dark memories of that fateful morning, then taking a deep breath she continued, "Well, you know the rest. My father can be a very spiteful man."

El took Aisling's silence as her cue to talk. "I wish I had given you the chance to explain, unfortunately I was too angry and upset to think clearly. I was hurt and I reacted to those feelings. I've been doing a lot of soul searching these last few weeks. I think it's my biggest personality flaw, reacting to situations that affect me emotionally, instead of taking the time to step back and think things through. I never gave you a chance."

Aisling shook her head, she couldn't let Elish shoulder all the blame. She knew it was a case of them both being pulled in different directions creating a conflict of interests for them both. "Without all the facts it's hardly surprising you reacted the way you did, El."

"I should still have given you a chance to explain, I regret that deeply."

Again there was silence between them as they both took time to gather their thoughts. El was relieved that she was getting the opportunity to talk to Aisling to try and iron out their differences. She was grateful that the blonde was giving her this chance and she intended to make the most of it. She was stirred from her thoughts by a question from Aisling.

"Tell me about the day at the drug centre? What happened, El?" This was something Aisling needed to learn more about, what she had seen that day disturbed her greatly. The image of Elish attempting to choke the man with the knife had haunted her ever since. She didn't fear Elish, but it had been a shock to witness first hand what she was capable of.

"My father was in the Gardai all his working life. One day he answered a routine call with his partner. Turns out a fight had broken out in a pub over drugs. My father walked into the pub and was stabbed in the throat, no warning nothing. He was dead before the ambulance arrived." Tears were leaking from El's eyes, she still missed him every day.

Aisling got up from the chair she was sitting on and immediately made her way across to the brunette, without hesitation she offered comfort. "I am so sorry. That must have been awful for you all."

El nodded, "That day at the centre something in me just snapped. Seeing that situation, a drug addict with a knife, knowing my father was murdered in similar circumstances, I just lost control." Elish was aware of Aisling rubbing her back trying to soothe her hurt. "When my Da was stabbed, the culprits fled the scene, his partner was too occupied trying to keep my father alive and couldn't pursue them. They were never caught and I have never gotten over his loss. I carry this ball of anger around inside me, its there just bubbling under the surface, fuelled by the needlessness and injustice of my Da's death. That day at the centre showed me that I have to take the time to grieve and try to let go of that anger. I have had this mentality that I won't let go of until the murderer is brought to justice. I realise now that it's not the right thing to do. I need to

deal with the emotion and not let it affect my decisions. I let myself down that day, but in doing so, I hurt the people who love me and lashed out at the most important person in my life when she tried to offer me comfort. I'm sorry for that Aisling, you didn't deserve the harsh words."

Aisling assisted El to lie down on the bed, as she continued to offer the tall woman words of comfort and support. Pushing off her shoes, she lay down next to El, content to allow them both some time to rest. They weren't done talking, but it didn't have to be done all in one night.

Aisling woke sometime later to find her limbs entangled with El's. Their arms wrapped around each other. It seemed that although her mind wasn't ready to accept El back into her life, her body had other ideas. She knew it would be too easy to just pick up where they left off. Elish was ready to do so; she had shown that by travelling to Edinburgh to see her. Aisling knew however that they still had a lot to talk about before they would be ready to rekindle their relationship, but deep down she knew that was what she wanted was Elish back in her life.

Elish stirred beside her and she watched affectionately as one blue eye peeked open. El's eyes widened when she realised she was wrapped around Aisling. She sat up and mumbled an apology.

"No need, El. I think we both sought out a little comfort in our sleep."

Noticing it was still dark outside though the bedside lamp, which neither of them had switched off, illuminated the room, El glanced at her mobile phone, seeing it was almost 6am. "What do you have planned for the rest of the day?" she asked quietly.

Aisling chuckled, "I intend to get some breakfast then catch up on my sleep."

"That sounds like a plan," Elish realised her words sounded presumptuous and attempted to rectify her error. "To get some breakfast, I mean.....but not necessarily together, I uh..."

Aisling silenced her with an offer, "Actually if you would walk me home, there is a place on the way that's serving breakfast. Will to join me?"

Smiling, grateful for the woman's understanding, El nodded. The more time she spent with Aisling, the more she was reminded that Aisling was a very uncomplicated woman. Lacking pretence or subterfuge, her straightforward easygoing approach to life was one of the things that most attracted El to her. "I would love to."

Walking back to Aiden's town house, they were close to the street he lived on when Aisling grasped El's hand and led her into a little place called *Larry's Diner*. It was fairly quiet inside with only a handful of customers sitting in booths. Aisling selected one tucked in a corner. Elish was starving, having not eaten since lunchtime the previous day. She knew Aisling had gone out to dinner the night before, but wasn't surprised when the blonde ordered the full breakfast with extra toast. El settled for some French toast with bacon. Breakfast served with tea and coffee

they both tucked into the food, grateful to be putting something into their stomachs.

El watched fascinated as Aisling swiped the last slice of toast over her plate, practically cleaning it of all remnants of her breakfast, then she hummed happily as she put it into her mouth.

Aisling caught El watching her and grinned, "Sorry, but I just love having my breakfast here on a Sunday morning, granted this is earlier than usual but it was just as good."

El smiled fondly at the blonde, marvelling once again at her appetite. Sipping her coffee, she idly played with her fork. "So, this woman you went on a date with?"

Aisling raised an eyebrow at El's mention of her date.

"Was that the first?"

"The first date with anyone? Or the first date with her?" Aisling clarified.

El suddenly looked very uncomfortable with the topic, "Ah, both."

Aisling's face sobered, all signs of teasing gone. "That was my third date with Sarah."

"Oh, I see."

"Do you?"

El dipped her head, "I'm sorry, forget I asked."

"No, I think it's important that we discuss this, otherwise you are going to be wondering and imagining what may have happened between us."

El inhaled sharply, Aisling was right, it was better to discuss this. "I would..." El stumbled over her next words, wanting to know everything, but uncertain that she really wanted to hear the reply. "So you and she..."

"Went out on three dates." Aisling answered.

Biting her bottom lip, El tried not to imagine what might have happened on those three dates.

"We kissed, El, more than once, but we didn't sleep together." Aisling stated plainly.

"I'm sorry, I know it's really none of my business, but I can't help but wonder."

"It's not, but I understand your need to know, I'm curious myself."

El peered at Aisling wondering what she was asking. In her own mind she hadn't dated anyone else, but in truth, she hadn't exactly not done anything either. Suddenly wishing she had never

brought the subject up, El wanted to be anywhere but sitting opposite a curious Aisling.

Clearing her throat, she considered just how to answer without making the blonde hate her. "I haven't slept with anyone," she began cautiously.

Aisling sat up straighter in her seat pinning El with a penetrating look. To the blonde's dismay, El began to look anywhere but at her. She waited until El would meet her gaze.

"I think I better explain."

"I'm all ears," was the sarcastic reply.

"First there was Bren..."

Aisling's outburst made El wince. "What! You and Bren?"

"Yes, I mean no!" She blew out an exasperated breath, and then covered her eyes with her hands in sheer frustration, all the while Aisling glared at her. "Bren kissed me," she continued on hurriedly. "It was her leaving night, apparently she has had a small crush on me and after a few drinks she just laid one on me." Aisling looked unconvinced. "Ask Naomi," El stated pathetically.

"Why? Have you kissed her too?" was the snippy reply.

El winced, "Trust me, Aisling, I was as shocked as you are by the lip lock."

"And that was all that happened?"

Without thinking El replied, "With Bren, yes. I was standing there thinking of a polite way to tell her I wasn't interested in her that way when the little minx said she wasn't even sure she liked girls, she just had a little thing for me!"

"What else, Elish? I know there's more."

"That was it, I swear, she walked off."

"Not with Bren."

"Oh, I see. Ah, well..., there was a night out with my brothers." El swallowed hard, she really didn't want to tell this story, she knew it was going to sound awful. "It's a family tradition you see, to take the broken hearted out to get drunk." El paused, "They have these challenges." She took a peek at Aisling, whose face remained carefully neutral. El was getting more nervous by the second; nothing made her as nervous as she felt right now sitting opposite Aisling. Not her presentations, not the marathon, nothing else could affect her this way.

"I, ah - I had too much to drink and ended up attempting the kissing challenge." Again there was

no response from the blonde, "Well you see, Tim holds the record and he was taunting me all evening, so I decided to try and beat his record."

"What was his record?"

"Twelve kisses."

"On the cheek?"

El winced, "Lip locks."

"How many?"

El swallowed, "Twenty four," she had some vague recollection of doubling his count that evening.

"Impressive, it's a wonder you have any lips left."

There was something in Aisling's voice that left El with an ominous feeling about all this. Frankly she was scaring El, with her controlled demeanour.

"Then you went home alone?"

Silence.

"Elish?"

"Ah, not exactly..." El quickly held up her hands to stop Aisling's outburst, the blonde had clearly reached her limit, "But it's not what you think."

"Then enlighten me," came the terse reply.

El went on to explain all about Emma, the Occupational Therapist. She may have been very drunk that night, but her recall of events wasn't too impaired by alcohol. By the end of her story Aisling sat staring at her for about a minute.

"Let me get this straight. Since we have been apart you have kissed twenty five women...passionately?" El nodded, "Not only that, but your brothers think you slept with Emma?" El looked properly chastised as she nodded. "Elish! What am I going to do with you?" As El raised an eyebrow in hope, Aisling threw up her hands in despair. "Walk me home, Elish, I have a headache coming on."

Elish awoke Monday morning feeling better than she had in over two months. She and Aisling were talking and she was going to be spending more time with the beautiful blonde, life was

good and she needed to burn off some excess energy. Donning a T-shirt, shorts and running shoes, El stretched in her hotel room. She had no idea where she was going to run in this strange city. Perhaps the hotel reception could help her out. Taking the stairs to the ground floor, El bumped into the assistant manager, Mark.

"Morning Miss Maloney."

"Morning, Mark. I wonder if you might be able to help me out. I want to go running, but I have no idea where I should head."

Mark smiled, "I know just the place and believe me, you won't get lost." He proceeded to give Elish directions straight down to the bottom of the Royal Mile, turn right at Holyrood palace and in front of her would be an extinct volcano. El knew he wasn't pulling her leg as she had seen the rocky protrusion from her room.

"Cross the road to the side with the loch full of swans," El nodded, "Then continue to your left, you will see a road that goes around Arthur's seat. Now it's almost four miles mind you," Mark cautioned, "but it brings you right back to where you started from, you can't get lost."

El thanked Mark and headed off down the Royal Mile just as he said noting all the tartan gift shops on her way, then a ...*mmmm Starbucks*... El took note of the location of the coffee shop, they were planned to open in Dublin by the end of the year, Elish had never been in one, perhaps she could before she headed home.

Just as Mark described, the palace was right at the bottom of the Royal Mile and you couldn't miss Arthur's Seat as it loomed over the Loch full of swans on the opposite side of the road. Crossing over, El easily spotted the entry to the road that ran around the extinct volcano, she moved easily over the smooth tarmac as the road gently inclined for the next mile as it swept around the hill. The weather was sunny and crisp with a slight frost covering the vegetation. The views offered from this vantage were stunning as the view swept unimpeded across first the sea then the rest of the city as El looped around the hill. As she completed the four miles, propelled at the end by the downward slope back to the loch full of swans, she felt exhilarated and went for a second loop around the hill.

Almost an hour and a half later El was back at The Bank hotel, sweating and grinning as she made her way through reception. Mark spotted her and beckoned her towards him.

"There is a message for you." As he went to retrieve the message he made small talk with her, "Did you enjoy your run?"

"I sure did, it was fantastic."

He grinned, caught up in her enthusiasm, "The directions were okay?"

"Yup, thanks for that."

"You're welcome,' he replied, handing El the note. "Did you enjoy the view?" He knew he sure was as he continued to admire the woman before him.

"I enjoyed it so much I had to go round a second time."

Mark's jaw dropped, he had thought her time was decent, but twice! He muttered something about *wonder woman* as El headed up the stairs to her room.

Elish read the note in her hand a second time.

Elish,

Meet me at the house around 10am.

Aisling.

PS: Dress warmly and wear sensible shoes.

El noted she had ample time for a shower. Then she could take a leisurely walk up to Rankeillor Street and be in plenty of time for whatever Aisling had planned.

Just before 10am she knocked on Aiden's front door. Aisling answered, her jacket in hand. "I thought it was such a lovely morning that we could go for a walk. I know a place where the view of the skyline is spectacular on a clear day like this."

"Wonderful." El took in Aisling's attire, jeans, a warm polo neck jumper, similar to her own clothing. Where they differed was the comfortable sturdy looking walking boots that Aisling wore and the Gore-Tex jacket she was currently zipping up. El glanced at her training shoes and parka.

"You'll do." Aisling proclaimed, picking up on the brunette's thoughts, "But you will probably need this too."

Aisling handed her a woolly hat, which El looked at in disbelief.

The blonde laughed, "Trust me when I say, you will be thanking me later."

"Will Aiden not want to come with us?" El enquired.

Aisling was warmed by El's thoughtfulness towards her brother. "He does enjoy a walk with me now and again, but he has seen fit to take himself back to the unit for the week. I believe he wanted me to have as much free time as possible while you are here."

"I would have been more than happy to spend time with you both."

"It's Aiden's decision, Elish, I'll call him and see if he would like to have dinner with us tomorrow night, but don't hold your breath. Maybe in time, he might be more receptive to spending time with you."

El nodded, "I look forward to that."

The blonde led the way to the opposite end of Rankeillor street, the end which El had never been to and proceed to walk towards...*"Yes, El thought, looks like I'm going up there for a second time today."*

As they began to walk up a well-used path, Aisling provided El with a little history. "This is Arthur's Seat, an extinct Volcano, it's 822 feet high, has two lochs and a ruined chapel on it, as well as a natural spring. It's my favourite walk and I'm amazed every time I get up to the top that this is right in the middle of a city."

El couldn't help the chuckle that erupted from her throat.

"What's so funny?" Aisling asked, puzzled by El's response.

"I just finished running around it an hour ago."

At the blonde's wide-eyed look, El laughed harder.

They slowly but surely made their way towards the top, making small talk along the way. Aisling occasionally laughing at El's expense when she slipped occasionally, receiving the odd good-natured glare in reply.

When they reached the top, Elish was stunned. The view spread out for miles out to sea to the east as her eye ran along the waters edge and farmland sprawled out towards the south. To the south she could see as far as another set of hills. The west showcased the centre of the city, with its buildings sprawling out for miles. The north was another densely populated area that ended at the docks. They both spent a few minutes in companionable silence as they looked out over the view offered to them, reward for making the climb.

"You look cute in that hat you know."

Elish looked at the understated black hat on Aisling's head, then thought of the bright red woolly hat she wore, certain she was being teased again.

"You really suit the colour red, you should wear it more often."

"Really?" Growing up without sisters, El rarely had this kind of talk, and anything her Mam told her suited her, she usually ran a million miles from, she was warmed by Aisling's observation.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome," was the quiet reply.

They walked part way back down the hill to a second loch nestled within the rock. El was becoming confused she swore she had counted three lochs so far. Aisling laughed and told her she had, but that only two were attached to Arthur's seat. The third belonged to the small village at the bottom of the Southside of the hill. Sitting on one of the benches that surrounded the smaller loch nestled within the hills, they sat close together. Aisling reached inside her small rucksack and removed a bag full of bread.

"These swans don't get as much as the ones on the lower lochs, not so easy to reach."

Elish nodded as she took some of the bread offered and began to throw it into the loch.

"They like Cheesy Wotsits too." Aisling added nonchalantly.

El looked disbelieving at Aisling, the thought of her feeding the swans the little cheesy corn puffs was not beyond the realms of possibility. "Please tell me you haven't been feeding the swans those?"

Aisling laughed, "No, but the last time I was here a little boy decided to share his, I swear the swans stopped eating the bread! He was so adorable when he realised they liked his snacks." Aisling leaned her head towards El's strong shoulder, the brunette was doing cartwheels inside, grateful for this show of intimacy, however small. "Have you ever thought of having children, Elish?"

El peered down into Aisling's face, flushed from the cold, her green eyes open and curious. "I have considered having children in my life, I'm just not sure if I want to give birth to a child myself. Certainly I don't at this stage in my life, but in the future and with the right person, it's a strong possibility." El answered Aisling smile with one of her own, "What about you?"

"I'm pretty certain that I want children, but not right now. I'm sure I would in the future though and unlike you, you big wimp, I think I would really like to experience pregnancy. Not so keen on the labour part," Aisling's nose wrinkled to convey her thoughts on that part of the process, "But I think it's something I definitely would like to go through. I love kids."

"Naomi is pregnant," El remarked.

"Oh my God! She is?"

El nodded, "She and Declan are going to make wonderful parents."

Aisling smiled at El's obvious affection for her friends. "I think so too. I don't know them nearly as well as you do, but spending time with them at your barbeque, I got a sense of how they are as

people." Aisling was lost in thought for a few moments. "I really miss everyone, you know? Will you tell me what's been happening?"

El smiled fondly at Aisling, her ability to get to know people and become a part of their lives was thoroughly endearing, and she herself had been missed around the place.

"Let's see, goodness, so much has happened and not just at the centre. First off Bren has left."

Aisling's head whipped up at that news. "Really?" She had obviously missed that information the first time it was mentioned, El thought. It was hardly surprising given the topic then was her kissing Bren.

El smiled broadly, "She has, but it's fantastic Aisling. She has started University. Doing Social Work!"

"Oh, Elish, that is fantastic."

"We are all so thrilled and proud of her. I have a new guy, Brian..." El paused before adding, "He has red hair."

Aisling burst into gales of laughter and a few swans flapped their wings at the sudden sound. "At least Bren only had half her hair red."

"It's growing on me."

"Yeah, sure it is, Elish," she remarked, clearly not believing her tall companion.

El made a face, "Mrs Fitzgibbon broke her hip."

"Oh, the poor thing. How is she doing?"

"Really good now. I found her on her kitchen floor; she had been there overnight. She slipped on some spilled water just before going to bed and couldn't move. I had to kick her door down. Honestly, Aisling, I thought she was dead."

Aisling rubbed El's arm in support.

"Thankfully she wasn't and now she has a new hip and a new hearing aid... that was a shock." They both chuckled. "She was very down at first, but we all rallied round and got things sorted. Looked after her when she first got home and now...she is as good as new."

"That's' great news, El."

"It is, I was really worried about her for a time. Now I'm best buddies with her cat, Tac."

"Wait, she called her cat Tac?" Aisling burst out laughing.

"I know it's a bit unusual..."

Elish it's cat backwards!"

"I never thought of that, to tell you the truth I was more preoccupied with trying to figure out what sex the thing was."

Aisling continued laughing, "Not an animal lover then?"

"I wouldn't say that, but I think I might be more of a dog person, something like a Great Dane."

"It's suits you," Aisling deadpanned.

El frowned, "What about you, do you like animals?"

"I like dogs, but I lean more towards Labradors."

"Hmm, maybe we could get a crossbreed?"

Aisling burst out laughing, "You, Elish Maloney are crazy."

"But you would consider having a dog with me?" El asked hopefully.

Aisling smiled, "Sure I would."

"Brrrrr, it's getting cold, you want to start walking again?"

"What about some lunch?" The blonde asked.

"Lead on, MacDuff."

"Oh, you think you are so funny. You do realise that line was never used?"

"NO!" Elish pronounced with pretend shock, as the pair continued to banter back and forth as they made their way back down Arthur's Seat.

They walked back up the Royal Mile, Elish looking longingly at Starbucks as the pungent aroma wafted out into the cold air. They continued further up the cobbled street, passing kiltmakers, woolly jumper shops, lots of cafes, pubs and tourist shops. It was the first time El had been going slowly enough to take in all around her. Finally, Aisling went into a theatre telling El that the café there did the best homemade soup in the city and after a brisk walk on a cold morning it was exactly what they needed.

A bowl of chunky winter vegetable soup and a BLT later, they were both full and chatting about Aisling father.

"So, he signed the contract then signed over the new buildings that are being built to you?" El enquired.

"Yes, goodness knows what I'm going to do with a pub." They shared a laugh at that.

"I was going to ask Mr Kelly if he would consider continuing as the bar manager. I can't think of anyone more suited to the job."

"Neither can I. I'm sure he will accept your offer." El gave Aisling a fond smile, "You are such a considerate woman."

Aisling shrugged, "It makes good business sense," she replied shrugging off the compliment, but they both knew it was more than that prompting Aisling to offer Mr Kelly the job.

Elish finally broached the subject that they had managed to avoid for the last 24 hours, "So you will be our new landlord, or do you prefer landlady?"

Aisling looked down at the wooden table, they had to get past this obstacle if they were to move forward in their personal lives. Raising her eyes to grip Elish in a penetrating stare she answered. "I'll be honest with you, Elish. The last thing I want to be is your landlord. I made a decision to that end before you showed up here in Edinburgh. I've had a lot of time to think about this and I knew that my father gave me the deeds to these buildings in part to get back into my good graces, but I believe it is more than that. I genuinely think my father wants to put right his part in our relationship ending. The only way to do that is to get us back together, at least talking to each other." Aisling could see the hope clearly mapped out on El's face and she knew it had nothing to do with buildings or property deeds, it was to do with them and the possibility of the two of them getting back together.

"Whatever you said to my father had a profound impact upon him. He has gone from condemning my relationship choices to championing you as my number one suitor. I have to tell you, Elish, it's been quite a strange time adapting to that. I asked him why he felt you were the right person for me, you know what he said?"

Elish shook her head negatively.

"He told me he knew without a shadow of a doubt that you had my best interests at heart. When you turned down his proposal and instead told him succinctly what he needed to do. He was shocked on two fronts, firstly by your selflessness and secondly by your balls!" Aisling laughed, "His words not mine." She shook her head, "He was stunned, Elish, and he was also very impressed with your integrity."

"Aisling, I don't care what your father thinks of me, but if him liking me makes your life easier,

"I'm all for it."

Aisling nodded then continued, "As I said, I came to a decision, one that I believe is best for everyone concerned. I'm donating the new centre to the community, that way I won't be your landlord, but most importantly it assures the future of the services both centres provide."

"Aisling, that is the most amazing gift, I can't believe it."

"The buildings were given for free; it was a simple case of changing the contract of sale. I think it's right that the new centre should belong to the community. However, there will be one or two clauses, mainly involving the purpose of the buildings. They must continue to be used to benefit the community, not sold by some bureaucrats in a few years time, as a way to cut costs and bring in some revenue."

El smiled when she heard this, "I think the clauses will be very important, I would hate to see that happen."

Aisling continued, "I want you and Naomi to have some input when it comes to the layout of the new building. You two know better than anyone what you require in terms of office space, conference rooms and anything else you require."

Elish was so totally overwhelmed; she didn't know how to start thanking this precious woman. "This is beyond anything we could have ever hoped for, Aisling. Thank you from the bottom of my heart." Elish wiped at a tear that threatened to trickle down her cheek. This woman never stopped amazing her.

"Will you do me a favour?"

"Anything," El readily replied.

"Will you come shopping with me?"

El's face was a picture, it was her least favourite activity, but right now she would walk over hot coals to be with Aisling.

Elish got ready for her final night in Edinburgh before returning home to Dublin. Aisling had suggested they go out to a bar for a drink, El was happy to keep it casual. She had enjoyed the last few days immensely, feeling in that time she had learned more about Aisling than she had in the previous time they had spent together as lovers. El desperately hoped that they could be lovers again. Feeling that they were moving in the right direction, they seemed to have reached a precipice. El was uncertain about making the next move; the last thing she wanted was to make a mistake. If Aisling were to rebuff her advances now it would set them back and hinder a lot of the progress they had made in the last few days. Elish cautioned herself to be patient, but in truth if she were to head back to Dublin without knowing where they stood with each other, it would

drive her crazy.

Putting all thoughts of what ifs and maybes behind her, El reached for her jacket, determined to enjoy this last night with Aisling, regardless of the uncertainty surrounding any potential romantic involvement. Elish had loved simply spending time with Aisling as friends and if that was all they could be at this stage in time, she intended to relish every moment she could share with this special woman.

El knocked on the heavy red door and waited. A few moments later Aisling answered it.

"Hi." El smiled warmly at the blonde.

Aisling said nothing, instead she looked intently at El for a few moments, Elish wondered what was going through her mind. She shuffled her feet, beginning to feel uncomfortable under the intense scrutiny, then suddenly her eyes zoned in on Aisling's and they connected. El recognised all the signals the blonde was sending out, the dilated pupils, the slight flaring of her nostrils, the increase in her breathing. El waited patiently for Aisling's next move.

Reaching out, Aisling gently grasped El's hand in her own, then turned to walk into the house. El followed easily, aware of the warm digits wrapped around her cold ones. Walking along the hall, they passed the sitting room, then proceeded up a staircase. El could feel her heart beating faster against her chest, fingers rapidly heating in Aisling warm hand. At the top of the stairs, El was led into a room she assumed was the blonde's bedroom, it was cast in a soft glow from a single lamp. Aisling turned to face El and began unbuttoning the brunette's winter jacket.

Swallowing hard, El remained silent, content to let Aisling lead them wherever she wanted to go. The blonde had yet to utter one word this evening, but her actions were saying more than any words could at this point in time, clearly Aisling had decided the time for talking was over.

Aisling began to slowly undress El and herself, alternating between them, removing an item from El's body then her own. The brunette remained totally captivated, seemingly lost in the slow cadence of the blonde's actions; they were hypnotic, deliberate and graceful. They had yet to kiss, El had yet touched her soon to be again lover, yet she had never been so aroused in her entire life. Soon they both stood naked, caressing each other with their eyes only, the moment hauntingly beautiful, yet intensely erotic. When Aisling trailed soft deliberate fingers down El's forearm, the brunette shivered and felt the hairs on her arm stand up. Grasping El's warm hand, the blonde led them towards the double bed.

Stopping at the side of the bed, Aisling removed her hand from El's, leaving the brunette standing, she gracefully slid across the top of the covers, to lie on her side, facing El, waiting.

Swallowing down the ball of emotion that threatened to overwhelm her, Elish took a moment to look at the beautiful woman, lying naked before her, waiting on her to make a move. Aisling had led them to this point with El happy to remain passive, content to go wherever the blonde wanted to take them. Now she lay before her, offering everything to Elish. It took everything the

brunette had to keep her composure and accept that which was being freely given.

Trembling, El slowly approached the blonde, laying beside her in a mirror pose of Aisling's. Slowly, almost reverently she began to trace the out line of her soft pink lips with a long finger, lips she had been dreaming of for weeks. Wetting her own, she finally leaned forward to capture them, letting out a whimper at the first contact with her own. Instinctively their hands moved to each other, caressing skin, fingers running through hair. Elish moved Aisling onto her back as she insinuated a long leg between the blondes now parted thighs. Slowly they began to rock against each other, still no words being spoken, the only sounds filling the air were the gasps and moans of the two reunited lovers.

El left Aisling lips to move her own over the blonde's neck and shoulders, before moving back up to her lips, she couldn't get enough of them having gone too long without being able to kiss them. Working on instinct alone, El knew she wanted to remain right where she was; she slid fully between the blonde's thighs, reaching down to part them further. With Aisling's co-operation, she guided the blonde's knees towards Aisling's upper body, opening the blonde fully to her. Elish parted her own thighs and gasped when her clitoris came into contact with the blonde's. Rotating her hips only slightly, keeping herself in contact with Aisling, El looked into the blonde's eyes, wanting to maintain this connection. Using one elbow to support her upper body, Elish used her free hand to caress Aisling's face and body, sweeping her hair of her face as sweat began to bead along the blonde's forehead.

Their bodies began to jerk and spasm with the first tell tale signs of orgasm. Elish watched as the blonde's eyes closed, no longer able to remain open as her orgasm shuddered through her body. El followed moments later, Aisling's moans of pleasure the final stimulus that triggered her own orgasm. The brunette collapsed spent onto Aisling's body, the emotion of the occasion finally overwhelming her, she began to sob into the blonde's neck, while Aisling spoke her first words of the evening, to comfort Elish.

The following morning El awoke wrapped in her lovers arms, a smile immediately blossoming on her face.

"Morning sleepyhead," came the voice from just above her head which was tucked under Aisling's chin.

"Mmm, morning." El sighed, she was totally content for the first time in weeks, her world had righted itself. Her eyes blinked open and her body stiffened as realisation dawned on her...she was going home today.

"What's wrong?"

El raised her face to look at Aisling. "I fly home today," she replied quietly.

"Hmm, what time do you have to be at the airport?" Aisling idly ran her fingers through, El's long dark hair, finger combing the tangles out.

"I have to check in before 1.40pm. I have to pack first, but that won't take long."

"How are you getting out to the airport?"

"I know where to get the airport bus from, so I was planning on taking that."

"Could I come with you?"

El smiled, "I would love that, but would it be alright if we got a taxi instead?"

Aisling smiled, a black cab would give them more privacy than a double Decker bus.

Aisling accompanied El to her hotel to pack and check out. As they stood at reception it was once again Mark, the assistant manager who tended to El's needs.

"Did you enjoy your stay in Edinburgh?"

"I most certainly did." El shared a knowing smile with Aisling.

Mark had to admit, the tall woman looked a lot happier checking out, than she did checking in. - he suspected it had something to do with the good looking blonde beside her. "Will you be coming back to our lovely city?"

Elish was pretty sure she would be back, this city now held some great memories for her, but more importantly the woman she loved currently resided here. A thought suddenly occurred to her, "Does Edinburgh have a marathon?"

"It certainly does, it will be in June next year."

El considered that, a marathon in June sounded pretty good to her. "I think I might like to run that."

"It's a lovely scenic route and perhaps you might like to stay with us again?"

"If I'm looking for a hotel I will definitely be trying here first."

"Wonderful, have a safe journey home, Ms Maloney."

"Bye Mark."

Elish and Aisling walked to the nearby taxi rank to catch a cab out to the airport. Aisling rolled her eyes when she heard, "Ooh, I get to go in a black cab!"

At the airport that afternoon, Aisling hugged El tightly, neither of them really wanting to be apart after the week they had spent rekindling their romance.

"You'll call me?" Aisling asked.

"Every night."

"I'll be in Dublin soon, El, I promise."

"I am going to miss you," El declared as she hugged Aisling tighter.

The pair shared one last kiss before El took the escalator, looking back as it made it's slow ascent, she kept her eyes on the woman she loved, as Aisling waved her goodbye.

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~ Conflict Of Interests ~

by Weebod

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

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

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

Conclusion:

Elish wasn't due back in work until Monday morning but come Friday she just couldn't resist the lure of the place. With a renewed spring in her step, she headed in mid morning, hoping to surprise Naomi.

Dressed casually, El walked straight past the front door of the community centre and entered the drug rehab centre next door. Acknowledging a couple of the counsellors, she didn't stop to chat, instead opting to head straight for Naomi's office.

Pausing outside her friend's office door, she smiled fondly at the scene before her. Naomi was standing reading, totally engrossed in the content of whatever was in her hand, while the other idly rubbed her stomach.

El stealthily approached Naomi and wrapped her arms tenderly around her. "How's the pregnant lady?" El whispered in Naomi's ear; while her hand moved down to join the one caressing Naomi's abdomen. Naomi hummed in pleasure, tilting her head back towards Elish. "Welcome home stranger."

"Any change yet?" El enquired, Naomi easily picking up her meaning.

"Not really, just a thickening around the waist. If folks don't know I'm pregnant, they can't guess yet."

"Won't be long now before they do, then your tummy won't be your own anymore." El teased.

"What, you mean there are going to be more people like you sneaking up behind me to cop a feel?"

"Yeah." El chuckled as she fondly caressed Naomi's stomach once more, before taking a seat.

"How have you been? You sound better." Naomi turned to fully observe her friend. "My God, El. You look wonderful! Wherever you've been or whatever you've been doing, its worked wonders!"

El grinned, "Thanks."

Naomi frowned impatiently, clearly expecting El to say more. "So...where have you been? You took off without a word - all Brian could tell me was that you had taken time off at short notice." She looked fondly at her friend, "You had me worried, El."

"Sorry about that," El had the good grace to look a little sheepish.

"Well?" Naomi prompted, when Elish didn't continue.

"Edinburgh," she replied, while affecting an air of nonchalance as she made a show of looking around the office, and idly picking up a leaflet.

"Annnnd.....?" Naomi was rapidly losing all patience with her.

El gave Naomi her full attention, unable to keep the smile bursting forth onto her face, "Annnnd, I have *so* much to tell you!"

El's excitement was contagious. "I can't wait." Naomi rubbed her hands together and gave El her full attention.

El proceeded to tell Naomi all about her impromptu trip to Scotland to see Aisling, and how they got back together. By the end of the story, Naomi had a tear in her eye, "Elish, that is so romantic. I couldn't be more happy for you." She stood up and went over to where El was sitting and bestowed a sweet kiss on her cheek. "I am so impressed with you. You went and got your girl back, I never knew you had it in you."

El shrugged, "Neither did I...but I'm so happy that I took the chance and I feel like the luckiest woman alive since Aisling took me back."

Naomi sat back down, grinning at El. "So what now? Is she coming home?"

"I don't know, right now I'm just so happy to have her back in my life." El was content, for the moment, to take one day at a time. "I'm sure when the time is right we can work something out."

"I'm sure you will." Naomi looked at her friend, who seemed to be bouncing around in her seat. She knew Elish well enough to recognise that there was something else in the brunette bursting to get out. Smiling, knowing it was more good news, just by the look on El's face, she demanded to know. "Come on, out with it."

El's eyes lit up as she relished being the one to tell Naomi all about the latest turn of events regarding the centres. She had considered phoning her from Edinburgh, but decided instead, to wait and deliver the news in person.

"Oh, Naomi it's the best news!" Naomi nodded, encouraging El to get on with it. It was rare to see Elish so animated.

Taking a deep breath, all that was missing was a drum roll. "The deal that James Keenan pulled out of is back on." She sat back, waiting for Naomi's reaction.

The dark skinned woman was speechless. Staring at El in disbelief, she tried to absorb the information. "You mean...?"

El nodded vigorously. "Yes! He signed the contract, so the centres will be rebuilt as a condition of the sale of the land."

Naomi ran her hands through her long hair. "Wow."

El was shaking her head, still unable herself, to fully believe the dramatic turn of events. "That's not all, Naomi. James Keenan will no longer be our landlord."

Naomi frowned, pleased to hear that bit of news, but curious as to whom would be taking his place?

"He has signed ownership of the new centre and the new pub that will be built, over to Aisling."

"Oh, that's good news, I don't doubt that Aisling will be a lot easier to deal with than her father was."

"I'm sure she would be," El replied cryptically, "But we won't be dealing with her after the centre is rebuilt." Naomi frowned. "Naomi...she is signing the new building over to the community."

The other woman's mouth dropped open, the words she eventually found a whisper. 'Elish, this means...' she shook her head not wanting yet to fully believe all she was hearing.

"It means *everything*."

And Naomi knew El was right, it did mean everything.

El stayed for coffee and the two friends caught up on what had been happening and discussing further the building of the new combined centre, both agreeing to keep the news quiet until it was a done deal.

"You had a visitor while you were away." Naomi mentioned casually.

"Who?"

"Tin Tits."

El rolled her eyes; Harriet Smyth was the area manager, therefore the immediate boss of both Elish and Naomi. Elish had nicknamed the woman Tin Tits after a boob job she had a couple of years ago left her breasts with very little natural movement.

"The vultures are circling. She would have known I was on holiday. No doubt saw an ideal opportunity to sniff around while I was away. I'll take great delight when we deliver the good news to her regarding our new permanent home. She won't be able to use us to balance her budget." They had both been aware that the longer they went without a resolution to their

predicament of losing their lease, the greater the possibility of them losing their budget from the *Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs*. They awarded a grant each year and paid the staff's wages. January was budget month and Harriet Smyth was responsible for who would get what. The timing of Aisling's generous gift was perfect. Hopefully El and Naomi would have the paperwork confirming their future before the end of December, thus securing next years funding from the Department responsible for the development of communities.

Naomi grinned, "Harriet was insufferable, walking around like she owned the place. Oh, Connor was brown nosing her at every opportunity. Even Molly had something to say about it." She paused, "sorry, I shouldn't be telling tales."

El waved off the apology as she pondered that for a moment. She had tried to be patient with Connor and help him see where he could learn and improve his skills. It seemed as though he were determined to progress by any means possible. Perhaps he just wasn't cut out for the grass roots of community work and would be more suited to the administrative side. Unfortunately, he appeared not to be able to comprehend that to work on the administrative side of the job, you had to understand what went on at the grass roots to assist you to make informed decisions.

El sighed, "I'm not surprised to hear that about Connor. He just isn't developing the way I hoped he would."

"Problem?"

"Too much ambition, too much ego." El sighed, "Unfortunately Connor is more interested in furthering his own career, than assisting the community. He showed so much promise in his interview, saying all the right things." She shook her head, "I must have missed something, there must have been some sign that he wasn't what he appeared to be." El sounded disgusted with herself.

Naomi sympathised, she had been in the same boat as El. "Some people talk a really good game, El. We just have to know when to cut our losses."

El mulled over Naomi's words, was that the answer? She wasn't sure she wanted to give up on him yet.

After leaving Naomi's office, El toyed briefly with the idea of popping into her own. Hesitating for mere seconds at the entrance sealed her fate.

"Elish! Elish, I need to talk to you." Looking over the car park, she saw Molly practically running to intercept her. Waiting for Molly to regain her breath, El looked on bemusedly. Molly had one hand on El's arm while she was bent over a little, taking deep breaths.

"Are you okay there?"

Molly nodded her head, "Just give me a moment." She took a few more deep breaths, "I am so glad to have run into you, El. I need your help. I'm desperate."

"Go on." El replied cautiously.

"Tuesday is the annual holy trip for the pensioners, this year we are going to 'Our Lady's Island' in County Wexford." El nodded, she knew all this. "Well, we are one volunteer short, Elish. I have asked everyone. Please say you'll come?"

El frowned, "I can't, Molly. I have meetings backed up from this week that I already cancelled. I can't reschedule them a second time."

"What am I going to do? If I don't find another person to come along I will have to let down six of the old folks." Molly sounded frantic.

"What are your numbers?" El asked calmly.

"I have twenty-one old folks coming along this year and only three helpers. I can't let them down. I need to find a fourth staff member."

El did the numbers in her head, "How many of the folks have Alzheimer's?"

"Four this year."

El nodded, that explained why Molly required one more helper; otherwise they would be forced to cut the numbers back to fifteen. "And you've asked absolutely everyone?"

Molly nodded, "I had my numbers, El, but Connor pulled out, apparently he has arranged a visit with Harriet Smyth."

"Has he now?"

The look on El's face told Molly exactly how pissed off her boss was upon hearing that news.

"Look, I don't mean to be telling tales. The visit means a lot to him, I'm sure that I can come up with someone else."

"You don't have the time, Molly, leave it with me." El stormed into the building in search of Connor.

"Hi, Brian, is Connor around?" El winced, his hair looked pink.

"Oh, Elish, welcome back." He reached for a notebook with lots of post-its sticking out of the pages. "I have so many messages for you, these are just today's."

El put up a hand to stop him. "They will have to wait, Brian. I'm not back at work until Monday, but right now I need to see Connor."

"Got you, he's upstairs."

El headed straight for the community workers office on the first floor. Opening the door she noticed Connor was the only person in the room, his feet on the desk, mobile phone in his hand, chatting to someone.

Elish rapped on the door to get his attention. Connor raised his head, and then held up his hand in acknowledgement.

"Sure thing, I'll see you tonight then. I can't wait Babe. Need to go, have some business to go over with my boss."

He ended his call and El was more pissed off than ever with him. She realised in that moment that Connor was a first class prick, one she wanted rid off, but until then, he had a job to do and Elish was going to make damn sure he did it.

Walking casually towards Connor, she stared at his feet until he removed them from the desk. El decided to get right in his face, putting her hands flat on his desk and leaning over him a little, thus pinning him in his seat, with no option but to look up at her.

El spoke calmly, "Pick up the telephone and call Harriet Smyth, tell her that you seem to have forgotten you had a prior commitment on Tuesday and reschedule your visit to her offices for a day when you are free."

Connor looked up shocked at his boss. He opened his mouth to protest, but El cut him off. "Do it."

Grabbing the phone petulantly, Connor made the call. After leaving a message for Harriet Smyth, he hung up the telephone and glared at Elish.

"Now. You will apologise to Molly and inform her that you will be assisting on Tuesday. Do not let her down." El looked hard at Connor, he still glared petulantly at her. "After the trip you will arrange a meeting with me, where we will discuss your thoughts and experiences of the day. We will also discuss your attitude and your commitment towards fulfilling your responsibilities. Have I made myself clear?"

"Perfectly," was the moody reply.

"Good." With that El left in search of Molly to deliver the news. She just prayed that Connor would do a decent job on the day.

Monday morning found Molly sitting in El's office, while her boss read her the riot act regarding tomorrow's trip. Reaching into her filing cabinet, she removed a folder.

"What's that?" Molly enquired.

"Notes on previous trips."

Molly winced; her boss could be so...thorough.

El put on her reading glasses, "Is Mr McGarrity going?"

"Yes - and before you say it, I'll remember to adjust his hearing aid, *before* we start the journey." Molly still recoiled in horror at the memory of the man vomiting all over the coach last year. She had no idea a hearing aid could cause someone to throw up when they travelled. If only his family had thought to mention that before the trip.

El nodded, "What about Mrs Gallagher?"

Molly grimaced, "Yes, she's going."

El removed her glasses, addressing Molly sternly, "If she turns up with a hip flask I want you to confiscate it."

"She won't stand for that, Elish." Molly recoiled in horror at the thought.

"She won't be standing very long if you don't." El responded. "Tell her there is no drinking alcohol on the bus - new rules...and for God's sake, monitor her closely. I don't want to be switching on my T.V to find out that your trip is headline news," El warned.

Grimacing, Molly recalled Mrs Gallagher's antics from last year's trip. The woman declared she had seen something. When you're standing in front of a holy shrine where an apparition has taken place, a claim like that tended to cause a fracas. That was until they had gotten a whiff of her breath.

"You know, El. She still claims she saw something."

El rolled her eyes, "I don't think pink elephants are quite what the church has in mind at a holy shrine. Keep an eye on her."

"She won't manage all day without a drink - the woman is an alcoholic."

El nodded, "I know; I'm not saying you should confiscate whatever she brings along all together - just moderate her intake. You know what will happen on the trip back if you don't," El warned.

Nodding meekly, Molly agreed, a seventy-two year old woman stripping on a bus full of pensioners was not a recommended leisure activity.

"One final thing, Molly." The older woman knew what was coming, if this happened they would be the laughing stock of Dublin. "Do not, under any circumstances, leave anyone behind."

"We won't, El. Barring an arrest or hospitalisation, we will bring everyone back."

"Don't even mention those things, Molly!"

Molly smiled, "I'm sure everything will be fine."

"Good to hear, now after all that, have a great trip."

"Thanks, El."

After Molly left, El got back to work. She had so much work to get through after her last minute dash to Edinburgh the week before. She wasn't complaining though, the trip had been worth every message she had stacked up waiting for her attention, every rescheduled meeting she had to attend - every phone call. Elish had a very busy week ahead of her, but still seemed to find her attention frequently flitting to a certain blonde who was right now in London, visiting with friends from university. Her mind drifted back to the previous day when she had told her Mam the good news, how happy her mother was for her. The mood at the lunch table had been considerably upbeat for the first time in weeks, mostly due to the fact that El was no longer sitting there with a long face.

The week was rolling by in a blur of meetings, phone calls and paperwork. Come Friday morning she had the pleasure of Connor's company. Molly had said that Connor was sullen and uncommunicative throughout the trip on Tuesday. The brunette was at her wits end with the guy, wondering what she should do with him.

"Morning Connor." El greeted him cordially.

"Morning." He was still in a mood.

El noticed he didn't have notes with him, which immediately raised her ire.

"Well, how did you find the trip?"

Connor immediately went of on one. He was full of scorn, venting his frustration at being used to *baby-sit* a bunch of pensioners, some of whom had no business being on a trip in the first place.

El tried to steer him back towards the purpose of the meeting.

"I gather you had a difficult time with the dementia sufferers?"

Connor fumed, "Why were they even on the trip in the first place? It's not like they can take any memories away from it."

El was aghast. "Have you considered that for them it's a case of living in the moment? Yes, they can't retain any memories from the day, but don't you think it's important that their day was filled with moments of joy and laughter?"

Connor shrugged and El became seriously pissed off.

"What would you do? Have them remain indoors with little stimulation in their life because taking them places means a little more effort from you?" *God, he is truly vile! How could I have been so wrong?* El berated herself, as she counted to ten, before continuing.

"Connor, why did you choose to apply to work here?" she asked calmly.

"I wanted to work for you?"

El was puzzled, "Why me?"

"You are the youngest boss ever of a project this size. I mean, you became the boss at twenty-four, that's unheard of. I'm twenty-two now, I wanted to find out how you did it."

El groaned inside, she never saw this coming. "I've been the boss for a little more than three years, I'm almost twenty-eight. I went to university when I was sixteen, Connor. I was the youngest in my class at school, because my birthday is in early January. My parents had the option to send me to school early, or keep me in nursery another year. They felt I was ready for school. That meant, by age sixteen I had the qualifications for university, I was accepted and went. I did four years and got my degree by age twenty. It's unusual but not unheard of. I came to work here and I loved it. I had no ambition to become a boss at such a young age, the truth is, I almost didn't take the job. The previous boss was leaving for a job in London and he begged me to take it, saying I was the ideal candidate for this place. Connor, it's not about the prestige of being in charge that had me taking the job. I took it because I wanted what was best for this community. Eugene, my former boss, believed in me and encouraged me because he wanted what was best for this community also."

El shook her head, "If it's promotion and prestige you are after, you chose the wrong place to work. We need you in a different capacity from the path you have chosen for yourself."

"How do I get onto that path then?" Connor clearly wasn't interested in changing - he wanted success.

Elish had a plan forming in her mind, one that would suit them both, Naomi was right, she really

did have to cut her losses where Connor was concerned. ""I think you would be much better suited to an administrative post, one where you can learn the ropes."

Connor nodded, "Can you recommend me for anything?"

"Leave it with me, I have a couple of ideas."

Elish spent her weekend catching up with her household chores and doing some food shopping. Having made no plans, she soon found herself running out of things to do. She had already visited Mrs F, the woman was doing brilliantly well with her new hip. Deciding a little spring-cleaning was in order, El made a start on her hall cupboard. She was always throwing things inside out of the way. Thirty minutes later, El looked at her hall, it was full of boxes and a lot of shoes, especially trainers. She was forever buying new pairs for running; it was her one excess when it came to spending money. Always wanting to try out the new claims made of a certain shoe, in her quest for the ideal pair.

Reaching into the back of the cupboard El removed a box and immediately remembered how it got there. A smile crept across her features, she had meant to throw it out, but obviously something had stopped her. Putting the box aside, El intended to fully explore its contents at a later date.

El pulled her Mondeo into the car park to start yet another workweek. Life was good; the only thing that could make it better was seeing more of Aisling. Locking her car door, El slung her new briefcase over her shoulder; then stopped abruptly when something familiar caught her eye. There in the corner of the car park was a little silver sports car. El would know it anywhere. Spinning on her heel, she changed direction and headed straight for Aisling's office.

El stopped at the open office door, taking in the sight of her lover standing, bent over her desk deep in concentration. Putting her briefcase down just outside the door, Elish snuck up on the blonde.

"Hi gorgeous." El whispered as she slipped her arms around Aisling. The blonde immediately turned in El's light embrace to face her.

"Surprise!" Aisling exclaimed.

"It sure is." El replied, having had no idea that Aisling was in Dublin. She captured the blonde in a searing kiss that conveyed just how happy she was to see her lover.

"I flew in first thing this morning. I wanted to surprise you."

El continued to pepper the blonde's face with kisses. "You have."

The accountant attempted to put a little distance between them, only to have El pounce again; she was all over the blonde like a rash, with Aisling trying to squirm out of her grasp.

"We can't, El. This is my office," she joked, as she moved back to her desk.

"Uhuh, that never stopped you before."

"True, but unfortunately, I don't have the time."

"Come on, I've missed you, just ten minutes?" El pleaded.

Aisling laughed at her lover, "Ease up there, Stud, we have work to do."

El pouted, work wasn't exactly what she had in mind, but Aisling seemed adamant. Seeing the pout on her lover's beautiful face, the blonde attempted to appease her. "What are you doing tonight?"

"You?" El replied hopefully.

The blonde laughed, "You are incorrigible."

El threw Aisling a rakish grin, hoping for a positive answer. The blonde sighed, feigning protest; "I'll be at your place around seven tonight?"

El's eyes lit up, "Great! Now, what's this work we have to do?"

"I have a meeting, which I have to leave for in...." Aisling checked her watch, "Five minutes. After that, I should have something concrete for you."

"Okay, so when will you be back?" El had wondered why Aisling was dressed in her business clothes, not that she was complaining. The blonde looked fantastic.

"Can you and Naomi meet me here this afternoon? Any time will work for me."

"Let me ring her."

El pulled her mobile from her coat pocket.

"Naomi, it's El."

"Yeah, yeah. Listen, are you free to meet with myself and Aisling this afternoon?" El listened as

Aisling waited.

"Uhuh, no, that time's no good for me."

"Alright," El nodded, "Four o'clock this afternoon in Aisling's office. See you then, Naomi, later."

El looked over at Aisling, she shrugged as she put her phone away. "That's the best we could do between us."

Aisling smiled, "That time is fine with me. I have to run, see you at four." A quick kiss to El's lips and she was ushering the brunette out the door. As she made her way to the silver Mercedes, El kept pace with the quickly moving blonde. One more quick kiss and Elish was closing the car door. She stood watching until the car left the car park, half dazed at this morning's turn of events. Life certainly was full of surprises.

At almost four o'clock, Elish and Naomi were walking across the car park towards Aisling's office, wondering what the accountant would have to tell them.

They found the blonde sitting in front of her computer; she smiled when she heard them at the door.

"Hi come in."

"Nice to see you again, Aisling." Naomi greeted the blonde with genuine warmth.

"You too, Naomi and I hear congratulations are in order."

"Oh, yes. " Naomi rubbed her abdomen, a gesture El was coming to recognise as a sign of Naomi's subconsciously feeling for her impending bump.

"How far are you along?"

"Almost four months."

Elish spoke for the first time. "I think she got pregnant the night of the barbeque, must have gotten turned on with all the perving she was doing."

Aisling laughed and Naomi glared, "Hush up, Elish, the dates are all wrong. No wonder you need to be with an accountant."

Aisling laughed harder, she had missed these two together. "Would you ladies like to take a seat?"

"Thank you, Aisling. Hopefully your good manners will rub off on this pig."

El frowned as the other two women shared a laugh at her expense. Mumbling to herself as she took a seat, about someone definitely rubbing off on something.

Aisling gently cleared her throat to draw attention to the reason for them all being in her office. "This morning I was at a meeting with representatives from the supermarket chain who have bought the land, and the builders they have hired to carry out the work. I have some plans for you both to look over. As I've already mentioned to Elish, I want you both to have some say in the layout of the new centre that will be built."

Naomi raised her eyes in surprise and nodded, "Wow."

Aisling smiled, "I figured no-one would know better than the two of you, what you needed in this new building. To that end, you will both be included in the next meeting with the builders and their architect, same time next week. The planning permission is already in place for the centre, your input will concern the layout of the interior." They both nodded, waiting on the blonde to continue.

"They want to start work on the centre as soon as possible, hopefully in January. With an estimated timescale of six months for completion of the work."

"That soon?" Elish asked.

Aisling nodded, "They really want to get going on building the new centre, that way it eats into less of the time it will take to build the supermarket."

"What exactly does that mean for us?" This came from Naomi who was frowning, trying to figure out how this could all be achieved.

"Okay, here's the plan. They start work at the top of the field, which will be the location of your new premises. You will remain in your current building until the end of the lease. That takes you to the end of March. If all goes according to plan, that means you will all be without somewhere to work from for around three to four months." Aisling paused. "Unfortunately that is a situation that's unavoidable and one that I can't help you with."

Elish and Naomi nodded their understanding. "I'll talk to the school headmistress about the possibility of using some of the classrooms. She was willing to go for that before, hopefully she will be able to offer us a temporary residence. I'm sure the school could do with the revenue it would bring in." She looked to Naomi, knowing her friend didn't have that option.

Naomi blew out a long breath. "This is all great news, Aisling, truly wonderful news. It seems wrong to be fretting about any problem it might throw up, none the less, it does leave me in a bit of a spot, but one I'm happy to be in."

They all fell silent for a moment, taking a little time to mull over what had been said, until Elish

spoke.

"Wait a minute." Both Naomi and Aisling turned their eyes on El, wondering what she had spotted. It seemed good if they were to judge by the look on her face. "We aren't being evicted from the land anymore, therefore we may be able to use it." They both wondered where El was going with this train of thought. El grinned at Naomi then turned to Aisling, "What about portakabins?"

"Oh, Elish!" Naomi exclaimed, thinking the idea wonderful.

They both turned expectant eyes on the accountant, wondering what her thoughts on the matter were. "It certainly sounds feasible, but I will have to take the idea back to the builders. The portakabins will need space and there might be issues with safety, being close to a building site."

El and Naomi nodded, both impressed with Aisling's practical thinking. "I'll call them with the idea, see what they come back with. But now let me show you both the plans for the building and the overall layout of the entire project." Aisling rolled some blueprints out on her desk, pointing to a certain spot.

"See, this is where your new building will be, as you can see, when the supermarket is finished you will be separated by a large car park..."

Aisling had arrived while El was getting changed after showering. She had asked the blonde to make herself comfortable while she went upstairs to finish drying her hair. A few minutes later El returned downstairs, to find Aisling in the kitchen.

The brunette watched riveted from the kitchen door, staring at Aisling who was bent over the wooden table, browsing the evening newspaper. Her jean-clad backside was tantalising and teasing El with every subtle twitch. She was sure the blonde knew where her eyes were. A small sigh and another subtle shift of gluteus muscle caused a resulting twitch in El's groin. She screwed her eyes shut, attempting to tamp down her rapidly rising libido. Opening her eyes, El latched onto two mischievous green orbs. That did it for El. Turning on her heel she made for the stairs.

El returned to the kitchen doorway less than five minutes later to find Aisling exactly where she left her. The blonde didn't acknowledge her presence, but El knew Aisling was aware of her. Walking purposefully towards her target, El leaned over Aisling, resting one hand next to the blonde's, on the table not yet touching her.

"Took you long enough," Aisling taunted.

The only reply to Aisling's mild tease was a shakily drawn intake of breath from Elish, as she leaned her hips into the blonde's beautiful backside.

Gasping aloud, Aisling instantly recognised what Elish had in mind as the brunette continued to slowly rock her hips against her. Elish didn't speak; instead she traced the blonde's delicate ear with her tongue, all the while her breathing becoming more ragged as her arousal increased. By sheer strength of will, El continued to go slowly. Moving Aisling's blonde locks aside, she rained light kisses on the back of her neck, nuzzling the soft hair as she went. The desired effect was being achieved in spades, as Elish began to drive Aisling crazy with need, to the point where she was beginning to lose all patience with her tall lover.

Continuing her slow, sensual assault, El used one hand to grasp the blonde's hip, while the other snaked under the tight fitting T-shirt Aisling wore. Elish caressed the soft warm skin beneath her fingers, taking her time as she moved tantalising close to the blonde's lace clad breasts, only to retreat back to her lower abdomen, then tease Aisling again, by venturing in a whole new direction. On and on El continued her slow tactile assault until, sensing Aisling needed something more, she moved both her hands under the blonde's shirt to cup her breasts. Aisling let out a sigh, part pleasure and part relief, she wasn't sure she could have withstood much more of her lover's patient ministrations. El continued to gently push into the blonde's backside while kneading her breasts, pushing up the lacy bra to access the soft warm orbs below, the nipples standing out in stark relief from the soft mounds of tissue.

Pushing back into her lover, Aisling sought to encourage El to move things along. The blonde was so wet, and the ache El had placed within her needed to be sated. Becoming impatient, Aisling reached behind her to grab Elish, only to have her wandering hand returned to the table. Elish then continued the slow maddening thrusting of her hips, rubbing against Aisling's twitching backside. She was driving them both insane with want.

Aisling swallowed hard and screwed her eyes shut tight, her breath coming out in whimpers, she wasn't sure she could take much more of this slow torture, she didn't want her arousal to spill over into frustrated need.

Slowly, deliberately, El continued until the blonde could take no more of her seemingly endless control.

"For God's sake, Elish. *Fuck* me before you drive me insane." She managed to choke out.

The words served to push El beyond the limits of her control. Her hands flew to Aisling's waist to unbutton her jeans. El immediately pushed the jeans and thong down the blonde's legs, removing only one leg from the confines of the clothing, before standing back up to work on the buttons of her own jeans, the soft, worn denim easily giving up the metallic buttons, allowing the phallus El wore, to spring forward proudly from its confines.

With trembling fingers, El guided the silicone to Aisling's centre, then slid it all the way inside with a soft grunt of satisfaction, the resounding groan of pleasure from Aisling only served to increase El's arousal further. They both stood motionless, chest heaving as they savoured this moment of joining.

Slowly, deliberately, El began to thrust her hips into Aisling, causing the blonde to moan and squirm. The blonde had both arms locked, her palms flat on the wooden surface of the table, bracing herself. Her soft groans and whimpers filling the air as El continued her slow thrusting.

El was mesmerised by the sight before her, her rhythm never faltering as her hands clasped the waist in front of her. She watched the silicone phallus continually slide home as she worked her knees, hips and thighs. Her concentration only interrupted by the sight of Aisling moving onto her elbows, bending further over the table and offering even more of herself to her lover.

El stopped thrusting and instead rotated her hips, causing Aisling to twitch and moan, encouraging El to continue to slowly grind herself into Aisling. The blonde was again becoming frustrated with El's will power. Sensing her partner's need, El lifted one of Aisling's legs onto the table, her knee bent, to accommodate her new position, Elish then began to thrust once more using Aisling's grunts of pleasure to guide her.

Sweat began to drip from El's brow as she worked harder, thrusting continually, skin slapping as her hips snapped into Aisling's backside, their resounding grunts and moans of pleasure echoing in the tiled kitchen. Elish felt her own orgasm approaching. Moving one of her hands to Aisling's centre she began to stimulate her clitoris with her fingers, pushing the blonde along with her. As El came loudly, she continued to thrust frenziedly into her partner, as she slammed the phallus home one last time, unable to continue thrusting, she became aware that Aisling was screaming out her own climax. Pushing the phallus deeply into the blonde, El continued to stimulate Aisling's clitoris until the smaller woman collapsed onto the table, breathing harshly whilst twitching the last of her pleasure, unable to take anymore.

El stayed buried deep within her partner, who continued to whimper, as they both attempted to calm their rapid heartbeats and regain their senses. El didn't want to ever move from this spot, but considering they were both half dressed, bent over her kitchen table she supposed they couldn't remain there much longer. On wobbly legs, El gently eased the phallus from Aisling and stood up. The blonde bemoaned the loss, shuddering as El removed herself from deep inside her. Quickly re-buttoning her jeans, leaving a bulge that now felt a little alien after the fact, El soothingly rubbed Aisling T-shirt clad back.

"Come on sleepy head, let's get you somewhere more comfortable."

Aisling grunted, "I don't think I can move."

El felt quite good about that and allowed herself a little smirk and a mental pat on the back, before she slowly removed Aisling's leg from the table and set it onto the slate tile floor.

"Do you think you can make it upstairs?"

"Don't wanna move." Came the drowsy reply.

Smiling, El took matters into her own hands. Turning the prone blonde she sat her up on the table, and ignoring the squeal of protest, she lifted Aisling into her arms. Paying no attention to the jeans dangling from one of the blonde's legs, she walked through to the sitting room to lay her on the sofa.

"Oh God Yesssss!" El hissed her release through clenched teeth as Aisling continued to lap at her engorged clitoris. El was spent; she had no idea how long they had been making love. After a short interlude on her sofa, the couple made their way upstairs to the bedroom. Aisling feeling refreshed after a nap had decided to test El's stamina by pushing her to her limits. It seemed the blonde wasn't yet convinced that El was finished. Maybe she should beg for mercy?

Gently nudging the blonde head, Aisling looked up from her comfortable spot between El's long legs. Her lips glistened with the brunette's juices in the muted bedroom light. Grinning up at her lover, Aisling began to lick her lips. Despite thinking it impossible, El felt herself becoming aroused again.

"Come up here?" El rasped, her throat a little raw from her frequent cries of passion.

Aisling slowly made her way back up El's body and kissed her fully, as she began to once again rock her hips, sliding a thigh between El's legs. El groaned, truly doubting her body's ability to peak once more, having had the pleasure of Aisling spending an inordinate amount of time with her head buried between the brunette's legs. The blonde sensing her lovers plight took pity upon her, "Just raise your leg, Elish."

A short time later they lay totally spent in one another's arms, neither of them feeling ready for sleep despite the hour. El decided she was beyond the need for sleep and was content to lie in her lover's arms.

"Are you staying at your parents while you're back in Dublin?" El turned her head to lie face to face with Aisling. She had wondered where Aisling was staying and, more importantly, how long!

The blonde shook her head, "No. I don't ever see myself living there again, not even short term. I'm staying at The Clarion."

El recognised the name of one of Dublin's upmarket hotels. It was modern and trendy, she thought the choice suited Aisling. Hesitating only slightly, El asked the question that had been on her mind since she saw Aisling in her office that morning. "How long are you here for?"

They looked into each other's eyes and the moment seemed to extend and grow. The importance

of Aisling's answer was not lost on either of them. El's face was full of hope, she didn't dare to think that Aisling would be back in Dublin on a permanent basis, but she knew that was what she wanted.

"I'm returning indefinitely." A small smile edged its way onto El's lips upon hearing this news. Aisling continued to explain her decision, "I need to be here to finalise the details of the contract negotiations."

This was a more sobering prospect for El. Of course Aisling would need to be here, she immediately chastised herself for having dared hope that Aisling's decision was made with her in mind. She was getting ahead of herself.

Reaching out a hand to stroke El's cheek, the blonde continued, "That's not the only reason I'm here." She smiled at El, "Aiden and I - both of us, need to sort out our lives, in terms of direction. We pretty much each accused the other of hiding out in Edinburgh and to a certain extent, that is true for us both. Aiden told me that in no uncertain terms - he doesn't mince his words, my brother is nothing if not direct."

El smiled, that was the lasting impression he had left her with. "He sure is."

"He told me to stop using him as an excuse to remain in Edinburgh, and to go where I wanted to be." Aisling shook her head, "I disagreed, but the guy was training to be a lawyer, he put forward a most convincing argument." Aisling chuckled, "he had me tied in knots by the end of it, I wasn't sure where to start countering his points. Anyway, he made me realise that I have, in part, been using him as an excuse. With the best of intentions, I really do want to spend time with him. The truth of the matter is - it's too much. He doesn't want to rely on me on a daily basis; he likes his solitude and his independence. When he feels the need for assistance, he has the clinic. He can spend his weekdays there and if the need arises, they can assess and admit him."

"Aiden wants to continue to see me one weekend a month and occasionally more, he enjoys those times. My father is visiting as well now; they seem to be doing okay. Things have started to progress, to the point where we may all be in Dublin for Christmas. Aiden is giving serious thought to coming over to spend Christmas with me. If all goes well, we might spend Christmas day together as a family. That would be a very big step for all of us, but especially Aiden and my Mother."

"That would be wonderful, Aisling."

Aisling nodded, "It would be a start, I don't want to put too much stock into it. I'm cautious and hopeful all at the same time. A reserved dinner without incident would be wonderful. If that happened, I would be hopeful that things might progress in a positive direction."

El nodded, understanding Aisling's reasons for being cautious. Her family had a lot of hurdles to overcome. Perhaps this could be a start for them? "I hope Aiden decides to come over for Christmas."

"I do too. If he sits in the same room as my Mother, it will be a big step."

El found it hard to imagine how a family could become estranged, to the point where they actively didn't want to see each other. She thought of her own family and how close they all were, and then it struck El that the reason for that was her Mam. She took a moment to wonder if things would be different if her Mam wasn't so insistent that they all turn up for Sunday lunch. Perhaps her family weren't as close as El would like to think. Would she go to visit Tim? That gave her pause for thought.

"Is everything alright, El?" Aisling enquired, seeing the faraway look in her partner's eyes.

El smiled reassuringly at the blonde, "Yes, I was just thinking about families and what we take for granted."

"Such as?"

"My family would be considered close," Aisling nodded her agreement, "But I wonder just how close we would be without the effort that my Mam puts into keeping us together?"

"You don't think you would see your brothers as much?"

El looked sad, "I'm certain of it. If there were no mandatory Sunday lunch we could go months without seeing each other, especially Tim and myself. Well - unless my car broke down, it would be at family functions only. I mean, I visit my nieces and nephews on their birthdays, but without kids, I wouldn't have a reason to visit Tim. We really don't get on."

"That's a shame, you two could pass for twins."

El pursed her lips as she mulled that over. "Suppose so." They were silent for a few minutes, happy to just hold one another.

Aisling let out a giggle and El wondered what she found funny, "What?"

"You have to be in work in less than two hours."

El glanced over her shoulder at the digital clock display behind her, noticing that it was almost seven am. She made a face, "And what about you Ms Keenan? What do you have planned for today?"

Aisling stretched like a cat, "I'm going flat hunting. I've made an appointment with a letting agency," She looked at El intently. "I'm going to rent somewhere. I need to be here for the foreseeable future because of the building work, but, El, I *want* to be here with you."

The words hung in the air between them; it was exactly what El wanted to hear.

"And I couldn't be happier." El leaned over to capture Aisling's lips, she could manage to work

on no sleep, sure that her level of happiness would be enough to see her through the day.

Things seemed to be moving along at a very rapid pace, since Aisling's return. The blonde had moved into rented accommodation, which was only about a twenty-minute drive from El's cottage, the brunette was ecstatic over that. It was hard to believe the way her life had changed over the last three weeks. It was now mid December, had anyone told her, prior to her trip to Edinburgh, what would transpire, she would have believed it to be an unrealistic fantasy. The truth was she couldn't have even wished for half of what had transpired, and expect it to materialise.

Today was Wednesday, 21st December, which meant tonight her staff would be enjoying their Christmas night out, after which, the centre would wind down for the festive holidays. Many of the staff chose to take an extended break at this time of year to be with friends and family. El was really looking forward to this day and it had little to do with the festivities planned for that evening, despite her date being a beautiful blonde. Today, Elish and Naomi could finally break the good news to their staff, since the dates and contracts for the building work had been finalised the Friday before. El had been a bundle of nervous energy in the days since. Suppressing the urge to just blurt out the fantastic news had been difficult. Rubbing her hands together, she made her way to the hall where both sets of staff were to congregate. The place had been buzzing since Monday, awash with rumour and speculation since the notice of today's meeting had been posted.

Stepping into the room, her arms full of copies of the upcoming plans for the centre, El smiled trying to put the anxious faces before her at ease. Glancing up at the door, she watched Naomi enter, she was sure her own smile matched that of the one on her friend's face and she could feel the anticipation in the room build as the staff responded to the positive vibes radiating from their bosses.

El began at Naomi's nod, the dark skinned woman had found herself becoming increasingly more sensitive to emotional stimulus; today's news had been playing havoc with her equilibrium since Friday.

Speaking loudly, El immediately had the full attention of everyone. Each one of them was desperate to hear the news. The main speculation amongst the staff was that their bosses had secured new premises; they weren't about to be disappointed.

"I'm sure you're all desperate to find out why you have been called here today," El began. There were a few nods and affirmative murmurs. "I'll get straight to the point," El paused for mere seconds and she could see some people physically lean forward in their seat, desperate to get the news. "We have secured new premises." She waited while the news sank in, then for the expected reaction. The volume in the hall increased as people let out a long held breath and then chatted and smiled with those around them. El took a moment to glance over at Naomi; they

shared a smile, both knowing their staff were going to be so much happier than they already were. A question brought El's attention back to the people gathered before her.

"Where is it, Elish?"

El nodded, "If you can give me just a few more minutes of your time, I'll lay out the main details, then you can collect one of these," she held up the notes of the meeting, "on your way out."

"Firstly, we won't be moving far. A deal has been negotiated with the supermarket chain. As part of the sale of the land, they agreed to build us a new joint centre." El stopped as the excitement once again began to build inside the hall. When the staff settled down she continued, "Our new building will be at the far end of the field, work starts in January and it will take around six months to complete it. Obviously we have to vacate these premises at the end of March, so Naomi and myself have sorted out temporary premises till the new building is finished. The community centre will be using part of the girl's school, while the drug rehab centre will be using Portakabins, near the building site. It will only be for around three months and I'm sure you all agree, it will be well worth the temporary inconvenience." El had to speak above the growing excitement, "Remember to pick up the information on your way out, and I'll see you all tonight."

She took a seat beside Naomi as they both looked at the happy faces of their staff. Some hugging, others back slapping and the odd tear was shed. Tonight was going to be a special celebration. There was nothing worse than a cloud hanging over your financial future; it was especially depressing at Christmas time. To see that cloud lift before your eyes was a memory for both Elish and Naomi to treasure. They would make sure in time that every person knew exactly who was responsible for securing not just their job, but also the long-term future of the resources they offered the community. Aisling Keenan was indeed a very special lady. Elish knew that more than anyone and she considered herself a very lucky woman, since Aisling would be on her arm this evening.

Elish navigated her way along the private tree lined road that led to Aisling's rented apartment. It was Christmas Eve and they would be spending it together. The pair had a hectic schedule coming up, which included spending a few days in Edinburgh with Aiden, celebrating the New Year. Tomorrow was a very big day for her blonde lover. She would be picking up Aiden from his hotel, then driving them both to an Irish castle for Christmas dinner with their parents. It would be the first time for over a year that the whole family would be together. Elish had noticed her girlfriend becoming more anxious as the day approached; she hoped that everything went off without incident. Having never met Mrs Keenan she couldn't be certain, but had a strong feeling that the woman's actions would dictate how the afternoon would go. Parking her car, El removed her overnight bag from the boot, then made her way to Aisling's apartment.

Depressing the button for the blonde's flat, El considered whether she could live here. She took in the modern building which contained around twelve apartments. All of which were nicely

appointed, fitted out with the latest mod cons and decorations. Aisling had moved into the flat just three days after arriving back in Dublin, it came fully furnished and had been available for immediate let. The accountant had signed a six-month lease, and moved in straight away.

"Hello?"

"Hi, it's me." El said into the intercom. There was a buzz and the door to the stairway opened. Entering the well lit, carpeted hallway, El made her way to the second floor where Aisling already stood in the open doorway, a smile on her face.

"Hi, you," the blonde uttered as she placed a kiss on El's cold lips, "Did you get all your wrapping done?"

El nodded, she had spent most of that day getting ready for Christmas dinner with her family the following day. That meant a lot of wrapping had to be done in one afternoon. The wrapped gifts were now sitting in a box waiting to be taken to her Mam's tomorrow. "All organised...I hope." El looked around the apartment, it wasn't her first visit, she had helped Aisling move some of her belongings in, but this would be her first time staying overnight. Aisling was feeling settled and had asked El if she would like to stay over. El loved her cottage, but if Aisling wanted her to stay here on occasion she was more than willing to oblige.

Removing her heavy jacket, then her shoes, El entered the carpeted living room and took a seat on the comfortable sofa. The centrally heated house was warm, so her jumper was quickly shed.

"I thought we could watch a Christmas film to get us in the mood, you want to choose one?" Aisling pointed to the coffee table where a small pile of DVD's stood. "I don't mind which one of them we watch, just choose what you like. I'm going to get some snacks."

El smiled, "Okay." Looking through the DVD's she selected one she hadn't seen before. Removing the disc from the case, El opened the DVD player and popped the disc into the tray, before sitting back on the sofa and grabbing the remote from the coffee table.

"Ah, that's what I like to see, a woman who takes charge," Aisling teased as she entered the living room, a tray full of assorted snacks in her hands. "I was thinking of opening a bottle of white wine, would you like some?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Good choice of film, by the way," the blonde threw over her shoulder as she left the room to get the wine.

El chuckled, knowing Aisling had already limited the choices, and she wouldn't have put out something she didn't like.

Two Christmas movies, a bottle of wine and a lot of snacks later, the two women were snuggled

close together on the sofa, soft music playing in the background. Elish kept an eye on the digital clock display on the DVD player, as it slowly clicked off the minutes to midnight. Katie Melua's dulcet tones caressing her ears, as Aisling's hands caressed her abdomen. El truly believed this was as close to perfection as she could ever recall.

"Merry Christmas, Elish."

El smiled and looked at the woman in her arms, obviously the blonde had been clock watching too. "Merry Christmas, Aisling."

They shared a slow lingering kiss, before parting for air. "Shall we swap presents now? Or do you want to wait till tomorrow morning?"

El took around five seconds to consider that. She felt great; she would be spending the night in Aisling's arms... "Let's do it now!" the brunette declared, as she carefully removed herself from Aisling's embrace to go in search of her overnight bag. Finding it in the bedroom, she returned with the gift hidden behind her back.

"What you got there, Stud?" The blonde enquired playfully.

El grinned at her lover, "Show me yours and I'll show you mine." El raised an eyebrow saucily. She relished having the playfulness return to their relationship.

Aisling got up from the sofa, waving a cautious finger at El, "Alright, but promise me you will close your eyes."

"Sure," El replied easily, which instantly raised Aisling's suspicions. "I mean it, El."

El laughed, "Alright, I promise."

Aisling nodded and left the room, returning moments later. "I'm coming in, close your eyes." El readily complied and she heard a rustle of paper, before the blonde sat on the sofa next to her. "You can open them now."

Opening her eyes, El noticed there was no sign of her gift; Aisling had hidden it at her side of the sofa. "Who goes first?" she asked.

"On three."

"Huh?"

Aisling giggled, "We'll swap gifts on the count of three."

"Oh," El nodded, "Alright."

"1...2...3..." The gifts were swapped and Elish found herself with an armful of packages. Her

eyes immediately growing wide.

Looking at the presents in her lap, El wondered which one to open first. Reaching for the smallest, Aisling stopped her. "Ah, could you open that one last?" the blonde requested.

El frowned, "Which one should I open first?"

"That one." Aisling pointed to the largest gift.

"Okay," El dragged out the word as she reached for the gift. Opening the wrapping paper, she quickly realised it was a jacket. Not just any kind, but a Gore-Tex outdoors jacket, similar to the one Aisling used for walking. It was in a dark green with navy lining, El loved the colours. "Oh, it's fantastic." She declared.

"Really?"

El nodded, "Yeah, really. Great colours."

Aisling was pleased. She watched on intently as El opened the next package and revealed a pair of lightweight, low-level walking boots in a combination of black and charcoal. Laughing with delight, Elish immediately put them on and, walking around the living room, tried them for size. "They fit really well! And they are so comfortable." She looked at the blonde, "is this your way of telling me I'm going to be doing a lot more walking?"

Aisling was biting her bottom lip. "I kind of hoped that you might like to come along with me now and then."

Elish walked over to her, and leaned down for a kiss, "I would love to."

Opening her final present, El found accessories for her new hobby; hat, gloves and socks, all in muted shades. Clearly Aisling had noticed her girlfriend's aversion to bright colours, especially the red hat she had provided her with in Edinburgh.

El noticed that Aisling had yet to open her gift, having been too caught up in watching El. The brunette suddenly felt nervous, what if Aisling didn't like her gift? Choosing gifts for Aisling had been so hard. Buying for everyone else had been a breeze in comparison.

Aisling opened the package and was delighted to find a book on famous New Zealand walks. She had once told El she would love to go there to walk through some of the most beautiful landscapes in the world. She had said, that where Ireland's landscape was old, worn and full of history, New Zealand seemed to be the opposite, more youthful and rougher looking in comparison.

"Oh, I can't wait to read this, I've been considering going for quite a while." The blonde opened the front cover, looking for an inscription, when something fell out onto her lap. Picking up the envelope, Aisling looked inside and gasped, when she found two return tickets to New Zealand.

"Oh, Elish," she whispered, with tears in her eyes, so overcome by her lover's thoughtfulness.

El looked a little bashful, but inside she was doing cartwheels, she had gambled and it had paid off. "I was hoping we could take that trip together?" she stated quietly.

Aisling flew into her lap and kissed her soundly. "This is the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me. I would love for us to go together. Not having someone to go walking with, and share the experience, was one of the things holding me back." She shook her head, still not quite believing what Elish had done. If any reservations had remained about her decision to let the brunette back into her life, they were banished in that moment forever. Aisling knew without a doubt that she had found the woman she wanted to spend the rest of her life with, she just wasn't ready to tell Elish that yet.

Aisling arrived at El's cottage a little after 8pm on Christmas night. Both women were tired for very different reasons. Elish was physically tired after a very hectic day with the entire Maloney clan, and Aisling emotionally, after her family dinner.

"How did it go?" El had been concerned, hoping that her partner's day had been without incident.

Aisling smiled warmly, at her lover's concern. "It was a little strained, but polite. It's hard to tell in some ways, my Mother was..." the blonde searched for the best way to describe her mother, "Actually, the strangest thing happened. She asked to meet you."

El was surprised, she certainly didn't expect to be meeting Aisling's mother in the near future. El nodded, part of her was curious as to what Mrs Keenan was like in the flesh. El could never understand how the woman could allow her family to exit her life so easily. "When?"

"Tomorrow, she said to ask you if you could come to dinner."

"At your parents house?" El tried to keep the shock out of her voice.

Aisling nodded slowly, "I understand if you don't want to go, I'll tell her you already have plans."

"No, don't do that." El looked intently at Aisling, "If you want me there, I'll go without hesitation."

"I'm hoping since my Mother extended this invite, that it's an attempt to at least try to accept who I am. I don't need her approval in any way, but I would like to give her every opportunity."

El smiled, she would expect nothing less of Aisling, as the blonde was always thinking of others.

"Then I'll go."

"Thank you."

The following afternoon, Aisling returned to the cottage to pick up her lover to go meet her parents. "You look wonderful, Elish," Aisling reassured the brunette for the third time in the last twenty minutes. She had never seen her partner fussing over her appearance before, yet here El stood before the full-length mirror checking once again. When she began picking imaginary lint from the sleeve of her grey jacket, the blonde stepped up behind her. Putting both hands on the taller woman's shoulders, Aisling spoke in her ear as their eyes met in the mirror. "Elish, you look great. I'm flattered that you've made this effort for me, but I would have been happy to take you to meet my Mother wearing your most comfortable pair of jeans and a T-shirt." El had opted for a grey pantsuit, with a plum coloured fitted shirt. She looked conservative, not that Elish ever went for flamboyant colours, but Aisling knew her partner was opting for complete safety with her choices. She was fashionably elegant, yet understated, a look the tall woman pulled off with aplomb whenever she made the effort. The barest hint of make-up coated the brunette's near flawless skin and Aisling could smell the subtle scent of El's favourite perfume.

She took in her own Donna Karan suit, her Gucci shoes and Yansi Fugel vintage blouse, all worn for her mother. If Fenella Keenan saw her daughter in anything less she would be horrified. Aisling sighed thinking she and her Mother had a long way to go. No wonder Elish was fussing over her appearance. One look at Aisling had surely been enough to raise the brunette's concerns over her own appearance. Aisling rolled her eyes, partly disgusted with herself. "Elish, my Mother expects me to be wearing designer clothing. I don't want to be wearing it; I just don't want to rock the boat. I'm sorry for allowing those expectations to cause you concern over your own appearance. You look wonderful, if my mother doesn't like the way you look...well tough." Taking El by the hand, she led her from the bedroom. "Come on, let's do this."

Knowing someone is rich, and witnessing that wealth, El decided, were two very different animals. As Aisling easily manoeuvred her Mercedes along the private driveway that led to her family home, Elish took in her surroundings. They were on the Southside of Dublin, surrounded by large properties with spacious grounds. As Aisling's parents house came into view, El felt her eyes widen. The electronic gates were her first clue, but the white building that loomed large before her was very impressive. El wondered how someone could have grounds this big and still be within the city of Dublin.

Aisling brought her car to a stop in the gravel courtyard, which already had four cars parked there; she noticed the questioning glance from her partner. "They all belong to my parents they, ah...usually park them in the garages," she shrugged. It was the first time she had felt truly uncomfortable bringing a friend to her family home. She was concerned that Elish would think her a spoilt brat. "It will just be my parents at dinner."

It was on the tip of El's tongue to ask who would be serving dinner but she thought better of it. Aisling seemed apologetic regarding the money on show and El, not wishing to cause her partner further embarrassment, enquired about the history of the house instead. "When was it built?"

"Oh, around 1830, we moved here about seventeen years ago."

"It's impressive."

Aisling smiled, "Shall we?" the blonde enquired as she gestured her head towards the house.

Walking up the six steps to the large double door, Aisling depressed the doorbell, which seemed to clang inside the house. El shuffled her feet nervously as they waited for the door to be answered.

A few moments later James Keenan opened the door, a pleasant smile on his face.

"Good afternoon, Aisling, Ms Maloney," he greeted politely.

El nodded to the man, "Please call me, Elish."

"I'd be delighted to."

Good God, the man could be positively charming when he wanted to be! El thought to herself.

"Please, come in."

Elish followed Aisling into the house, the blonde pausing to offer her father a brief hug, he then held out a hand to Elish which she promptly shook.

"Your mother will be down in a few moments, she went upstairs to freshen up. Why don't we take a seat in the drawing room, she won't be long."

Elish found herself entering a very spacious room. It was lightly decorated in champagnes and natural woods, with chandeliers and Persian rugs. She had to admit; it was tastefully elegant, right down to the matching marble fireplaces. El couldn't help but take a good look around the room; the detail was stunning, beautiful even.

"Did you enjoy Christmas with your family, Elish?"

It felt odd to hear James Keenan call her by her first name, "I did, thank you." This was hard going, but she could do it. "And you, Mr Keenan? How was your day?"

"I thought the day went well, all things considered," he looked towards his daughter who nodded her agreement.

"I should go see where your Mother's gotten to, please excuse me." He left the room in search of

the elusive Mrs Keenan; El hoped her delayed appearance wasn't a bad omen.

She blew out a breath and tried to relax a little, Aisling move closer to El and patted her thigh, "You're doing great, relax."

They shared a chuckle, "Is it that obvious?"

"Well you usually have this casual slouch going on, so I'm used to seeing you at least appear relaxed. Right now you look like someone sho..." The blonde never got to finish her sentence as the sound of her Mother's voice rang out into the room, drawing all eyes to the woman.

"Aisling, Darling, you're here."

"Yes, Mother."

"And you brought your friend, how wonderful." That comment seemed decidedly lacking in any true sentiment, but El decided to give the woman the benefit of the doubt.

"Mother, this is Elish Maloney. Elish, my Mother, Fenella Keenan."

"Pleased to meet you, dear."

"Likewise, Mrs Keenan."

Elish got her first good look at Fenella Keenan, she had little option since the woman was staring directly at her and didn't seem inclined to want to stop any time soon. She was a couple of inches taller than her daughter; she wore an expensive looking silk dress with a matching pearl necklace and earrings. Her hair was worn up, with not a single hair escaping its confines, it was blonde, like her daughter's, but that is where the similarities ended. Fenella Keenan had hazel coloured eyes and thin lips, which were currently displaying a tight smile.

The stand-off continued until James Keenan cleared his throat to draw attention to himself.

"Perhaps we should move to the dining room?"

"Off course, I'll inform Mary that we will be eating shortly."

Elish glanced at Aisling, who seemed to be finding the floor of enormous interest at that particular moment. As they walked towards the dining room, El took the opportunity to reassuringly squeeze the blonde's shoulder.

They entered a large, formal dining room. A huge oak dining table and chairs dominated the centre of the room. A regal looking period sofa lined up along the top wall and three large windows in the main wall offered an amazing view of the grounds. Mr Keenan made sure to seat Elish so she was able to fully enjoy the view in the late afternoon light. There was no sign of Mrs Keenan for the next few minutes and Elish wondered just how much of that was deliberate. They

had arrived at the appointed time so the woman had to have been expecting them. El sighed inwardly, if Mrs Keenan truly wanted to make an effort towards accepting her daughter's sexuality and rebuilding her relationship with her children, she sure had a lot of work to do. Nevertheless, El proceeded the way she had been taught by her parents, she could hear her Mam's voice at that moment, *Mind your manners, Elish!*

"You have a lovely home, Mr Keenan."

"Thank you, Elish. Perhaps, after dinner, I can give you the grand tour?"

"I'm looking forward to it," El replied offering a polite smile. Regardless of how this afternoon turned out with Mrs Keenan, James Keenan was certainly passing with flying colours. El entertained the possibility that she may actually grow to like the man.

Mrs. Keenan breezed into the dining room. "Ah, I see you are all seated," she proclaimed. "Mary is almost ready to serve." Taking her seat at the table, her posture as perfect as the beautifully manicured hands she clasped in front of her, she went on, "Well isn't this nice."

A false, tight smile stretched over bright red lips, Mrs. Keenan repeatedly tapped one of those same perfectly manicured fingernails against the knuckle of her other hand. As she sat there, El casually wondered if she had had any cosmetic surgery done. Mrs. Keenan was probably in her early fifties but she had a completely wrinkle-free skin and could certainly pass for younger.

"Where is it you stay, dear?"

"I have a cottage on the North side of the city. Near Swords village."

Mrs Keenan raised an eyebrow, El wasn't sure if she disapproved of the location or her living in a cottage.

"Do you live alone?"

"I do."

"No cats?"

Several answers flew to the tip of El's tongue, some ribald and some rude, but El opted to play the woman at her own game. "No, I've never considered having a cat. I do however, know a lot of woman who do...have cats." El maintained direct eye contact with the contrary woman, she would give her no quarter.

"I see." was the curt reply. "Well, I think I better go and see how Mary is getting along with dinner." Then she was gone again.

El's eyes flew to James Keenan when she heard the man chuckle, "I'm delighted to know that my wife isn't going to get away with anything around you either, Elish."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Mr Keenan." She looked directly at Aisling and witnessed a look of pride in her lover's eyes. That was all that mattered to Elish.

Dinner was a fairly quiet affair. Oddly enough, far from El's reply provoking Mrs Keenan, it actually seemed to have the opposite effect. She suspected the woman was a bit of a bully, used to getting away with all her verbal jibes and snipes. El was prepared for anything the woman wanted to throw at her. She would not allow this woman to make her feel inferior, Elish was much too proud for that.

After a meal consisting of polite small talk and wonderful food served by Mary, who turned out to be a woman in her sixties, James Keenan offered Elish the tour he had mentioned earlier. El politely accepted, leaving the two Keenan women to talk.

Starting on the ground floor, El was shown an array of rooms including a library, which was her favourite. Mr Keenan pointed out original features and offered some of the history of the house along the way.

"May I be frank with you, Elish?"

"Of, course, I much prefer it actually."

He smiled, "That doesn't surprise me."

"I won't pretend to you that I'm suddenly comfortable with my daughters sexuality. Perhaps in time, I will be, who knows."

El was puzzled, why then was he pushing them together?

"I have, however, come to accept that Aisling is a lesbian and no amount of wishing it were otherwise is going to change that."

El nodded, that made sense.

"The last two years have been tough for this family, especially in light of Aiden's illness. I think we all, with the exception of Aisling, lost sight of what's important. She is a wonderful sister and daughter, who has put up with a lot to try and keep this family together."

El wondered where all this was coming from, but she was happy to hear these words from Aisling's father.

"You have a very special woman there, Elish. I hope you realise that."

"I most certainly do. Aisling is everything to me."

Mr Keenan nodded, "I hope you can become a part of this family, Elish. I admire you, I believe that you could be good for my daughter."

Wow, was all Elish could think of. He sounded absolutely genuine. "Thank you, I certainly have every intention of being with Aisling for a very long time."

He nodded, "I think we should get back to the ladies, before Aisling comes looking for us."

Shortly after that, Elish and Aisling said their goodbyes, while not exactly a roaring success, meeting Aisling's mother had been interesting to say the least. El just wished her girlfriend didn't have to endure so many of her mother's caustic comments. Though Aisling handled herself with patience and grace, El had found herself wishing on occasion that the blonde would just stick it to the older woman.

As they stood in the entry hall saying their goodbyes it appeared that Aisling's mother had one last biting comment to make.

"It was *nice* to meet you, Ms Maloney,"

El thought the woman must have struggled not to choke on the word 'nice', though the emphasis she put on it, held a wealth of meaning, it would be a long time before Fenella Keenan could, or would, accept this relationship, if ever.

"Though I must say, you're not exactly what I had in mind for my daughter."

Once again El found herself biting her tongue, struggling not to let fly verbally, she was pleased to feel a small warm hand slip into her own.

"No, Mother, Elish is so much more than that."

El smiled, everything she had endured from this woman had been worth it, just to hear her partner say that. It made El's day in more ways than one.

Next stop was El's Mam's, before flying to Edinburgh the following afternoon. This would be the blonde's second trip to the Maloney household since she and Elish got back together. She had been thoroughly overwhelmed by Marie Maloney's welcome upon seeing her again for the first time in months, she really did like the woman.

"Elish, Aisling, what a pleasant surprise!" Both women hugged Marie Maloney as they entered her home.

"Hi, Mam. I'm flying to Edinburgh tomorrow and I won't be back until after the New Year. I wanted to come see you before I went. We both did." She smiled fondly at her lover.

Marie Maloney took in the two well-dressed young women before her, they really did make a lovely looking couple, "Look at you two all dressed up, have you been somewhere nice?"

El nodded, "We had dinner with Aisling's parents."

"I trust my daughter managed to behave herself and mind her manners?" Marie winked at Aisling as she said this.

"Mam!"

"Her manners were impeccable, she even managed to use her fork in her left hand." The blonde teased.

"She's come a long way in such a short time, I'm so proud."

The two women shared a laugh as Elish rolled her eyes. Deep down she couldn't be more pleased that her Mam and Aisling had hit it off so well.

As they drove back to her cottage that night, El was reasonably happy with the way their day had gone. She hadn't expected any kind of warm welcome from Fenella Keenan, therefore couldn't feel any disappointment at not receiving one. Knowing the best she could hope for between them was a polite tolerance. There was no doubt about it; Aisling's mother was hard work.

Elish decided Edinburgh's Hogmanay celebrations were magnificent and it wasn't even the main event yet. They had visited the winter gardens with Aiden. There they had gone ice skating, even Aiden, despite the limitations the anti psychotic drugs put on his co-ordination, had given it a go. Elish had seen a whole new side to him and she was relishing it. The trio had also gone on the carousel and the big wheel, meeting and chatting to people from all over the world who flocked to this city for the Hogmanay celebrations. On the Thursday evening they had joined the Torchlight procession, weaving their way through the historic streets along with thousands of other people, ending up on top of yet another hill, where they set fire to an enormous Catalan bull made out of wicker. The crowd were then treated to a spectacular firework display. El had loved the view on the way up the hill, when she glanced behind her, it looked like a river of fire as the procession spread out for miles, in the cold night air.

On Friday, they had gone to something called *The Night Afore*, which basically meant the night before the main Hogmanay event. This consisted of a street arts carnival, including lots of Catalan performers, apparently every year the celebrations included highlighting the culture from

another part of the world in conjunction with the essence of all that's Scottish, hence the setting on fire of a large Catalan bull the previous evening. It was all beginning to make sense to the brunette as Aisling diligently explained as much as she could, with Aiden filling in the most pertinent information.

There were so many events to choose from that the trio had gone for what looked like the main ones. Tonight was the biggest one of all, the Hogmanay street party, where the city centre was turned over to a quarter million revellers who had purchased tickets. They would be treated to music from live bands. This year was a decidedly Scottish affair with headlining acts such as K.T Tunstall and Texas. There truly was something for everyone, including a distinctly healthy side to the excess of food and alcohol. On New Year's Day, El would be taking part in the One O'clock run, which left from the castle esplanade. She had invited Aiden and Aisling to join her but the siblings, after politely refusing, assured that they would cheer her on.

As the main event approached, the trio found themselves enjoying *Tapas* in a little Spanish bar tucked away down a side street in the old town. When El noticed the location she realised they were only about two minutes from The Bank Hotel, yet the streets Aiden had led them through were alien to her. This part of the city was like a rabbit warren, one wrong turn and it was like being in a maze of cobbles and tiny closes, which all led to more of the same.

They left the bar at close to 11pm, to make the short walk to one of the many entrances to the street party. Aiden hesitated a moment, which caused Aisling to pause.

"Listen, I'm going to head back to the house. You two go on and enjoy yourselves."

"Elish and I would both love to celebrate midnight with you, Aiden. Will you not change your mind?" Aisling asked.

El reinforced the blonde's statement, "Yes, Aiden, come along with us."

Aiden smiled at them both, "I know, and thank you, but I would like to have a quiet New Year when midnight comes."

Aisling nodded, "Alright, Aiden. I'll try and call you just after midnight to wish you a Happy New Year, assuming I can get a line." She pulled her brother to her for a hug. "Either way, I'll see you when we get back."

El waved and watched as Aiden walked down the street, "It's a shame he didn't want to come with us."

Aisling nodded, "To be honest, I expected him not to go to the street party. It's very crowded with lots of people having an amazing time and at midnight it goes wild. Since the onset of his illness, Aiden has tended to avoid celebrations. I think he finds them too difficult to deal with."

El nodded, she could understand that.

"Aiden has really enjoyed the last few days, El. He hasn't said anything, but he seems to really enjoy your company."

"I'm glad, I've enjoyed the chance to spend time getting to know him."

Aisling gave her lover a quick hug, "Come on, let's get going...you sure you're ready for this?" Having been to the party with Aiden in 2003, before his illness, she had experienced the event first hand.

El nodded and they walked arm in arm towards the main gate.

The street party was amazing, El thought, the place was buzzing and the atmosphere electric. Giant screens were situated throughout the streets, beaming the live acts onto the screens, so the partygoers could soak up the atmosphere without getting crushed. There were people dancing in the streets, though some were much the worse for alcohol and were clearly not going to be remembering much about tonight. The weather was good for winter. The skies were clear and the temperature around -1°C, so it was pretty bearable wrapped inside their winter clothing. El shivered as she took in some of the attire being worn around her. Girls dressed in short skirts with light jackets, guys wearing only football tops. El thought they were crazy. She had once heard a joke about the Scots and cold weather, recalling part of it saying that when the weather reached 20 degrees below zero, Californians fly away to Mexico and people in Scotland throw on a light jacket. She was beginning to believe it!

They walked around, enjoying the music and holding hands, pointing out the more elaborately dressed people around them. The variety of headwear on display was Aisling favourite thing to point out. Hats representing every nationality were on show, along with some really funky creations. As midnight approached the streets really filled up, everyone getting ready for the main event, causing the air to fairly crackle with anticipation. Then the countdown started as the big screens displayed the seconds remaining till midnight. The crowd counted each second off from ten to one. As the fireworks exploded, lighting up the castle above them, the place went wild. Strangers were hugging each other and wishing everyone around them a Happy New Year. Elish took Aisling into her arms and kissed her fully on the lips, it didn't last long as they quickly became caught up in all that was happening around them. El even saw Aisling being hoisted into the air at one point, by a man in a kilt and a Scotland rugby shirt; he twirled her around before placing a soft peck on her cheek. This went on for several minutes and all they could do was laugh and join in the good wishes, the mood was truly buoyant.

Finally when things settled down a bit, they were back in each other's arms, El holding Aisling close to her kissing her cold lips once more. She could no longer hold back the feelings bubbling just below the surface and allowed them to finally spill forth.

"I love you," she declared with tears in her eyes.

The blonde looked up into her partner's face, too stunned to reply. El decided to repeat her declaration. "I love you!" Aisling leapt up into her arms, her short legs wrapped around the brunette's waist, as her arms flew around El's neck, and kissed her for all she was worth.

"I love you too, I love you too." She repeated close to El's ear as she hugged her tightly.

They kissed for a few moments more before Aisling broke them apart. "Let's go home, Elish, since I can't ravish you in front of thousands of people."

When they arrived back at Aiden's town house, all the lights were out indicating he was already asleep downstairs. Opening the front door, Aisling put her finger to her lips, gesturing that they should be quiet. Flicking on the hall light, they removed their outer layers, hanging them on the coat hooks. Next came their boots. Aisling then quietly opened the door to Aiden's downstairs bedroom. Elish watched on as the blonde entered his room and gently placed a kiss on her sleeping brother's forehead. El heard a whispered, *Happy New Year, Aiden*, before the blonde silently left the room, gently closing the door behind her.

Smiling at Elish, Aisling took her hand, and then quietly led her upstairs to the bedroom they were sharing.

A few hours later, a slightly dazed and naked Elish lay prone on the bed with a sleeping Aisling snuggled up against her side. The blonde had been intensely focussed during their lovemaking. El had met every thrust of the blonde's skilfully plunging digits, as Aisling had taken her repeatedly in the hours since they returned home. El had found herself manoeuvred into a variety of positions, while Aisling continued to pleasure her. El's last thought, as she gently drifted into unconsciousness, was that she had never got to return the favor. Aisling had loved her thoroughly, with a passion beyond anything Elish had experienced before. They had proclaimed their love for each other often throughout the intense encounter. That night they had moved their physical relationship to a whole new level, connecting in ways that Elish had never experienced with another human being. She felt literally, as though Aisling had been attempting to crawl inside her skin, and Elish welcomed her lover's attempts with a new openness, free of the fears, which, often in the past, had held the brunette back.

Four months later found El in her temporary office, pacing the floor like an expectant father to be. Declan had called that morning to say Naomi had gone into labour. He had promised to call back as soon as there was any news. Come dinnertime that evening, still having not heard a word from Declan, El was becoming frantic and had just told Aisling that she was *"Going to the hospital to find out what was going on!"*

The thought of her anxious lover storming into the labour ward had the blonde jumping to her feet to stop her. "Elish, relax, these things take time," she offered soothingly. "Declan is with Naomi, she's in good hands," the blonde continued to attempt to reassure her lover.

El blew out a breath, "How can it be taking so long?" she asked, clearly frustrated with the lack of news.

Aisling rubbed her nervous partners back. "The baby will arrive when he or she is ready. You have to be patient and wait on Declan's call."

That call came after midnight, with the ecstatic father declaring, "*It's a boy...and they are both doing great!*"

The following day, Elish and Aisling made their way to the new Mother's hospital room, El with her hands full of gifts. She knew she had gone over the top, but she was just so happy for the new parents.

The baby was beautiful; El held him in her arms and felt like weeping. He was lighter skinned than his Mam, a product of Declan's contribution, and a perfect combination of them both, El decided.

"What are you going to call him?" she enquired while Aisling took a turn holding the new baby.

Naomi smiled, "We are going to go with the current trend of naming the baby after where they were conceived."

Elish couldn't help herself, "Naomi, I don't think the name, *El's back garden* is going to get the boy very far in life."

Naomi glared, "I've told you before, the baby was *not* conceived at the time of your barbeque."

El smirked, "but you did do it in my back garden." She added cheekily.

Naomi looked over at Aisling, who refused to lift her head until the new Mother addressed her. "You told her?" She asked incredulously.

Aisling raised her eyes briefly and offered Naomi a sheepish look. The blonde had gone outside late that night to cool off, only to see Naomi and Declan walk back towards the cottage rearranging their clothing.

El gloated, "Seems we weren't the only love bird's that night."

Naomi rolled her eyes, "Not that it's any of your business, Elish Maloney, but Declan and I spent a romantic weekend in Aran at the end of July," Naomi smiled, "I really felt different, physically, after that weekend. I'm certain that's where the baby was conceived."

Aisling brought the child back over to his Mam, at Naomi's request, "I'd like you both to meet, Aran Connelly."

"Oh, I really like that, Naomi." El declared.

"That's so romantic," Aisling gushed.

A few minutes later, a rather tired looking Declan came back into the room. El thought he looked more like the one who had gone through labour.

"El, Declan and I have something to ask you."

Elish looked from one parent to the other, waiting for them to continue.

Naomi nodded for Declan to proceed. "Elish, we would very much like for you to be Aran's godparent."

The brunette could feel the lump form in her throat, she was stunned, but managed to find her voice as a wavering smile made its way to her lips. "I would be honoured," she replied hoarsely, and then moved to give Declan a hearty hug, before gently kissing Naomi and little Aran on the cheek. She glanced at Aisling as a tear escaped from the corner of her eye. The blonde moved to enfold her emotional partner in her loving embrace, enormously pleased for everyone in the room, including the newest arrival.

Later that evening, El found herself in a reflective mood. The scene at the hospital had really moved her. She had thought the sight of the new family together was beautiful and it left a part of El longing for one of her own. She was broken from her thoughts when the blonde offered to pay a penny for them.

El smiled, "I was thinking about today at the hospital, they were beautiful, weren't they?"

"Yes, they were." Aisling readily agreed.

They both fell silent, lost in their own thoughts once more. El's of her relationship with Aisling, and how far they had come since her first trip to Edinburgh. They spent almost every night together, either here at her cottage, or at the blonde's rented apartment. She knew that Aisling's lease was up in a few weeks and neither of them had spoken about what would happen next. Elish had been waiting for the blonde to say what she planned to do, either rent again, or look for a house to buy. Of course, the other option was that they live together. El knew what she wanted, and that was for Aisling to move in with her. However, she would be willing to move somewhere else, if that was what the blonde preferred. El had been wondering if Aisling's silence on the matter was a sign. A sign that she was actually waiting for El herself to suggest something. Deciding to be brave and take the plunge, El tentatively forged ahead.

"Have you given any thought as to what you want to do when your current lease runs out?"

El watched carefully as Aisling considered her question.

"Ah, no. I haven't really made a decision about that."

"I see." El wasn't sure how to proceed. She had hoped for a positive sign, but could read nothing from the blonde.

"I suppose I could renew the lease, or if not, find another apartment to rent." Aisling didn't sound overly enthusiastic at the prospect of that; perhaps it *was* the right time.

"I wonder...would you consider us, that is, you and I, living together." El hastened to offer the blonde a get out, "It doesn't have to be right away, I mean, if you want to wait, that would be fine by me." *Damn it! Please don't let me have blown this.*

Aisling smiled, "Where would you like for us to live, Elish?"

Immensely relieved and ecstatic, El answered, "Truthfully, I would like you to come live here, in the cottage, but, if you don't want to do that, I would consider living somewhere else." There she had said it and the ball was firmly in Aisling's court.

"I would love to live here with you."

"You would?"

The blonde nodded, "Very much so. When would you like me to move in?"

"How about, when your lease is up?"

"Sounds perfect to me."

El beamed at her partner, sweeping her up into her arms she declared, "God, I love you."

"I love you too, El, so very much."

Epilogue

Elish looked around her at the people gathered. She was standing in front of the newly built community centre, Naomi by her side. They had been open a week, to allow everyone time to

settle in, but today was the official opening of the centre. It had taken a little longer than the scheduled six months and here she stood, almost a year to the day since she first showed a certain green-eyed blonde around the old premises. Little did she know just how big a part that woman would play in all aspects of her life. They had moved in together two weeks ago and El was having the time of her life. She locked eyes with her partner who was standing beside her Mam; no doubt discussing whatever it was those two discussed when she wasn't around. Declan stood next to them, his son in his arms. Little Aran was almost two months old and growing like a weed.

They had decided to officially open the centre on a Saturday, allowing people from the community to come along and join in the celebrations and take a look around the new premises. This was to be a celebration for the entire community and they had splashed out, putting on free food and soft drinks, as well as entertainment for the kids. As with these things, the big bosses had turned up to grab some of the glory. El knew they were a necessary evil and tried hard not to grind her teeth as Harriet Smyth and her new protégé, Connor, fawned all over the celebrity opening the centre. Funny thing about the celebrity, getting him had been quite a coup, but for Elish it was more of a miracle, since the guy had actually called her offering his services. When the young man, who had grown up in the community, but now played football for one of the top teams in the English premiership, stepped forward to cut the ribbon, there were lots of cheers. Then the celebrations were underway, as an array of coloured balloons were released into the blue sky above.

Two hours later things were starting to wind down and El wanted to have a word with her counterpart before she left. With no sign of Naomi anywhere, she headed to the one place the woman would have privacy. Knocking on the door of her friend's office, El heard a quiet. "*Come in.*"

"How are you doing?" El found Naomi sitting in her new comfortable chair, little Aran lying sleeping in her arms.

"I'm good, just letting the little man get some sleep."

"Busy time for you, huh?"

"You have no idea." Naomi smiled fondly at her son.

"You're leaving aren't you?" El blurted, Naomi had said she was returning to work, but since she had the baby, she was a little less enthusiastic about her initial decision.

"I'll be honest, El, my original plan was to come back to work. This little guy has forever changed my life, and that includes my priorities. I won't be returning after my maternity leave is up. I'll be quitting. I might return to working, maybe two or three years down the line."

El nodded her understanding. Naomi wanted to spend time with her son. "You could come back

then." El mentioned hopefully.

"You never know."

"You'll continue on the committee, though?"

"Oh, definitely, I want to remain a part of this community and that's the ideal way for me to have some influence, Aisling made a very shrewd move there."

"That she did. You know I can't believe how much everything has changed during the past year."

Naomi shook her head, "I know, it's quite incredible."

"I'm really going to miss you around the place."

"I'll miss you too, it's been an absolute pleasure working with you."

"You too, Naomi." They both fell silent for a moment.

"You know, El, you may not be here yourself much longer. You're quickly outgrowing this place. You have the knowledge and drive to really make a difference to many communities. Have you considered a job in higher management?"

El scoffed, "Become a pencil pusher like Harriet? No thanks. I would much rather stay right where I am."

"I was more thinking, being Harriet's boss."

"I doubt anyone is going to give me a job that far up the chain, I'm twenty eight years old, Naomi. Most folk my age are only just applying for the job I have."

"Age has nothing to do with it, El. If you're good enough, you should get the job."

"Let's be honest, even if I am good enough, there is no way, I'll get in there. They like the status quo, I'm not sure they are anywhere near ready for a shake up of the system."

Naomi shrugged, "Maybe they will come to you."

"I think you're hormonal." El shot back.

Naomi let it go, but she believed El was destined for greater things in the future. "Maybe. So, what's next for recently married, Elish Maloney?"

"Ha ha, funny girl. " El knew Naomi was referring to the fact that she and Aisling now lived together.

"I tell you, El. Had someone said to me this time last year, that you would have been living with the love of your life, I would have bet my house against it. But I am absolutely delighted for you."

"Thanks, Naomi, looks like we both got what we wanted." El replied, smiling at the little bundle in her friend's arms.

Aran chose that moment to waken up; he opened his little lungs and bawled for all he was worth. Naomi cooed at him while her fingers deftly found the buttons on her shirt. With practised ease she was soon feeding her son, the room quiet as he suckled at her breast.

"So what are your plans, El?" She looked up to find the other woman taking a great interest in a picture on the wall, a flush creeping up her neck.

"My main priority is continuing to build a life with the woman I love." El continued to look anywhere, but at Naomi.

"My God, El! You are such a prude at times." El still refused to make eye contact. "Look at me?"

"Nope."

"Elish, this is the most natural thing in the world, you shouldn't be feeling awkward with me breastfeeding."

"Fine," El replied, "I'll look."

Naomi watched as her son continued to suckle contentedly at her breast, she stroked his head softly, before bestowing a kiss there. Looking up, she found her friend mesmerised by the sight before her. She waved her hand in front of El's face to get her attention.

El glanced up at her offering a bashful grin, "Sorry, but you're right, it is beautiful." She chuckled, but said nothing more.

In a rare moment of self-consciousness, Naomi wondered what her friend found to be so funny. "What?"

"I was just wondering..."

"Yes?"

"Has Declan ever tried that?" El nodded her head toward Aran.

Naomi frowned as she considered what El was asking. "My milk?" she clarified.

"Well yeah," El shrugged.

Naomi turned the tables on her inquisitive friend, "Would you?"

"I think I would be at least curious."

She fixed El with a sultry look, "You want to try now?"

"Wh...at?"

Naomi pointed towards her breast, "You want to try?"

Elish looked at her like she had two heads. "You can't be serious." She sputtered.

"It's just breast milk, Elish." Naomi replied reasonably.

"From your breast!" El was incredulous.

"What's wrong with my breasts? Are you saying there is something wrong with them?" Naomi looked really hurt.

"No! No of course not. They're...beautiful." El gestured towards them helplessly. Then watched on as a sly smirk crossed Naomi's face. "You are evil. You hear that little man? Your Mam is evil. I have to go meet Aisling." El spun on her heel and left a chuckling Naomi behind.

"Your Mammy's still got it." she said to her oblivious son as he continued to feed.

El spied the blonde chatting to someone she didn't recognise, deciding not to interrupt, she looked around, spotting Molly walking towards her, she offered the older woman a welcoming smile.

"Hey, Molly, you enjoying yourself?"

The community worker gave her boss a tremulous smile; "It makes me sad to think that I'm retiring in three months, Elish. I'm really going to miss all this.

"Ah, but you don't have to fully retire, you can volunteer to your hearts content. You know we would love to have you stick around in any capacity you wanted."

"I suppose I could keep doing the tea dance."

El smiled, knowing Molly wanted to do this, but would never put her on the spot by asking. "I can't think of anyone more suitable to take over from you, Molly, than you."

"Hey, there you are. I've been looking for you."

El turned to find Aisling smiling at her. "I was chatting to Naomi, we were up in her office."

"How is she?"

"She's leaving."

Aisling nodded, El had mentioned that she suspected Naomi might not be coming back. "So, how are you?"

"I'm good...I could be better though."

"What would make you better?" Aisling asked sultrily and Molly took that as her cue to disappear.

"Come with me and I'll show you." El took Aisling by the hand and led her upstairs. "I was thinking, that I have this new office and it needs some memories, want to help me with that?"

"Can we start with the desk?"

"We can start anywhere you like..."

The End

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