

Broch

There's a glint of silver as the moon passes briefly from behind the heavy cloud. 'Sorley, watch the fish cages!' The boat lurches right and I'm nearly in, bar a last minute two handed grasp onto the side of the boat. 'Jeez...'

You can't be choosy in this game and for all that he's got the IQ of a ferret, Sorley's big and does what he's told. And I needed big. Feeney might be a kid but he's built solid and I was never going to manage on my own. Sorley comes cheap too; a half bottle of *Cream of The Barley*, twenty Regal and a couple of skin mags from the bottom of my collection and he was in. He'd even come up with the idea of rowing out to meet Grigor. But it was my idea to go to Dun Carloway. Just like it was Feeney's.

*

Dun Carloway Broch was one of Miss Greer's projects and I'd taken Annie over on the first good day of a late spring. She'd taken a ton of pictures with the digital camera she'd got for Christmas and filled page after page of her notebook with wild scribbles while I sat basking in the cool sunshine looking over to Bearnaraigh Beag, the scattering of rocky islands that lay around it and endless sky and clear, calm water which eventually joined together in a blue haze. There were times when I was glad I had decided to stay on the Island and that was one of them. She never stopped nattering and kept me from dozing off with endless questions. Vikings. She had a thing about Vikings. That was another project and she wanted to know if they'd built the Broch or stayed there or maybe captured it from their 'menemies'. I played along and entertained her with a story of King Ethelred, first Lord of Shawbost, who'd won the heart of his princess by building the Broch by hand from stones he'd gathered from the side of Loch an Duin and carried up the hill on his back. They'd married in a ceremony attended by all their kin and partied for a full day and night until the first dawn light bathed the Broch in pink light, and reared four wee princes, just building the Broch a bit higher whenever they needed a bit more room. It was nonsense but she listened, fascinated, and peppered me with even more questions, only stopping when she had fallen asleep in the car on the way home. She'd won the class prize for the multi-coloured frieze she'd created and The Gazette sent a photographer up to the school to record the event. Miss Greer was delighted. Annie and Callum were the only two that needed extra help, as the school put it, and Miss Greer was the Saint that provided it. 'They're God's children too,' she would say, 'he's just decided to make them a wee bit different from the rest of us.'

Annie's a home bird, like mum, but when one of the kids took a flyer advertising the 80's theme night at the Caberfeidh into school she wouldn't stop talking about it. Mum aaw'd and ahh'd

but eventually caved in, with a fair bit of encouragement from Aunty Maureen. 'She's nearly sixteen Agnes, and it's not as if she'll be on her own, there'll be a crowd, isn't that right Fergus?' Mum glowered when I sided with Aunty Maureen and Annie squealed with delight.

Mum bought her a floral mini dress and found a classy old white leather clutch bag at the bottom of a box in the high street charity shop. I stuck a tenner and handful of coins into the Disney purse Annie never let out of her sight and pushed it into the bottom of her new bag. With that, and some blusher, eye-shadow and lipstick that mum put on, Annie looked fabulous - fifteen going on twenty two. I drove them down to the hotel in the old wheezing fiat and couldn't resist parking up for ten minutes before work and sticking my head in the lounge. A four foot wide glitter ball hung above a DJ with sideburns that reminded me of Dennis Hopper in *Easy Rider* and the room was full of well-oiled locals gyrating in flares, medallions and hideous nylon wigs. I didn't know if I should feel pleased or disappointed I wasn't staying.

It was chaos when I arrived at work. Both McAlpine brothers were in a flap: two trawlers had diverted from Scalloway in Shetland after the port wall collapsed and we'd got a huge order from Soerensen's to process the whole lot and get it on the first morning ferry to Ullapool. Most of the day shift had stayed on and the place was filling up to overflowing as the night shift arrived. I was just finishing pulling on my wet gear when the hooter sounded, letting everyone know the conveyor that carried the fish from pier side into the factory would start in one minute. I was in charge of one end of the hall and got to my station just as the hooter sounded again. Amber lights started to flash above the entrance into the factory and the huge conveyor belt burst into life. There was a radio on somewhere but it was overwhelmed by the noise of machinery, the clatter of fish boxes being moved around and the McAlpines' shouting instructions.

It was a whitefish landing. Haddock, cod and monkfish mainly, with some bigger whiting and hake the sorting team on the trawlers had left in. The fish were sized and sorted into different lanes by the team at the front of the hall. A giant skate and thick-girthed conger eel were hoisted off the belt and into their own icebox, destined for a specialist fishmonger. The *guts and butts* team, topped, tailed and ripped out the innards. Roe would be used in fishcakes and liver for fish oil and both were thrown into separate containers. The rest of the fish made its way to the next team who skinned, filleted and threw the shop-ready fillets into ice-filled crates. The heavy team carried the crates over to a low loader which would be wheeled out and along the jetty for loading onto the ferry. Martin and Jerry shared a crate between them, Sorley picked up two crates at a time and threw them onto the loader like Lego bricks.

With the last of the boxes filled and on the way to the ferry, there was a spontaneous round of applause from everyone and a chorus of thank-yous from both McAlpines. The changing area would be too busy for a bit so I walked outside for some cool, fresh air. There was a shout of recognition from one of the Trawlers and I looked up to see the bulk of Grigor Yushakov raising a steaming mug in my direction.

‘A good night. For both of us I think.’

I’d known Grigor Yushakov for years, a long story that traced its way back to a bottle of vintage Kaufmann vodka and a never-ending game of poker, and we caught up on the handful of occasions he came into Stornoway.

‘You didn’t tell me you were coming.’ I shouted.

‘I wasn’t.’

I was stiff and had a thick head the next day and it was mid-afternoon before I eventually made it out of bed and downstairs. Annie’s white handbag was lying on the kitchen table with a pile of frayed party streamers heaped beside it. With the long night I had forgotten about the disco and seeing both made me smile. I poured a large, strong coffee and downed a couple of paracetamol. The TV was on in the lounge, volume low, and Annie was lying along the couch, head on mum’s lap, still in her pyjamas and dressing gown. Neither looked happy.

‘What’s up with you pair then? How was last night Annie? Tell me all about it.’

‘I don’t know what’s wrong with her. I had to drag her out of bed and she’s been mumbling about that Broch of yours all morning, whatever that’s all about. Maybe she’s just on a bit of a come down from the excitement of last night. I hardly saw her – I don’t know where she was hiding herself.’

My head wasn’t going to let me do anything else except nod in agreement with mum and lose myself in front of the telly, gas fire popping, for the rest of the day.

Annie was no better on Sunday and mum had to leave her behind when she went to Church. That, and school, were the two things that got Annie excited and out the front door so it was obvious there was something wrong. I sat on the bed and read some of her favourite books to her for a bit and then gently asked some questions about the disco. It came out, in fits and starts, but it came out. Ed Feeney had danced with her, whirling them both around and then putting his arms round her when the music slowed. He’d asked her about the school prize she’d won and if she’d like to see Carloway in the moonlight, wouldn’t that be something even better to put into her next project? So she’d gone, in Feeney’s mum’s car, and he’d taken her up and into the Broch and taken

photos of her and him with the moonlit sea in the background. He'd cajoled her into loosening off the straps of her dress and he'd taken photos of that too. It had gone on from there. She didn't really know what he'd been doing but she knew it wasn't right. And to finish it all off, he'd told her not to tell anyone or the pictures would end up in *The Gazette*. I stroked her hair as she finished telling me, wiping the tears from my eyes with my other hand, taking care not to let her see. I convinced her that Feeney was an over grown kid, the paper would never be interested in anything from him and that she should just forget all about it. But forgetting about it wasn't something I was going to do in a hurry.

Feeney was the kid that got lucky. A father who'd skipped the country for a new woman and a beachside property business in Portugal years ago, and a mother whose lawyer brother cleaned him out of most of it not long after. He'd inherited his dad's cocky swagger and mother's brains and used both to build a clique that gathered around him like wasps round jam. But he'd gone off the rails. A girlfriend had turned up at home with a ripped face and a story to tell and he'd found himself keeping one of the two cells in the Stornoway nick warm. But his mum, and her brother again, had come to the rescue, played the 'from a broken home and too young to know better' card and smoothed the path to an acquittal. But me, and a lot of others, thought he was at the beginning of a steep slide downwards and it was turning out we were bang on.

Sixth form met after school at *The End Of...* a greasy spoon run by a school leaver who had found new purpose as a Goth. The decor was characteristically dark but the pastries were fluffy and light so I was an occasional visitor albeit without following the implied dress code. I ordered a latte and parked myself on the sprawling couch behind the table where Feeney and his entourage were sitting. I got a few nods of recognition from those who saw me but Feeney was engrossed in entertaining his group. I made a show of leafing through a newspaper but kept an eye on Feeney and spotted him pushing his phone into the pocket of his jacket hanging over the chair. I waited until they were all peering at a video on one of the laptops and, in a single move, retrieved his phone, slipped it into my pocket, downed the rest of my coffee and left the café.

I drove out of town and up the dead-end road behind the old pier before I took his phone out my pocket. I didn't trust myself to be anywhere near him if I found what I was expecting. Taking photos of teenage girls in varying stages of undress was obviously one of his main sources of entertainment and I recognised most of the faces. In among them, eyes wide and scared half-to-death, was Annie. Right enough, it was a good decision to have driven out of town first. It took half-an-hour pacing around the car, fists clenched, before I had calmed down to anything approaching normal.

I deleted all the photos of Annie, left the rest and spent ten minutes accessing a dozen or so hard-core porn sites. If the police got hold of his phone now he'd be in real trouble. I called Sorley on my phone and arranged to pick him up.

Feeney was just coming out the café when we arrived and looking thoroughly miserable. When he made for the path that led up and over the golf course towards his house at Marybank we drove round and waited for him in a gravelled lay-by at the other end. It was just edging towards dusk when we heard the tinny sound seeping through headphones. Sorley had him off his feet and into the boot before he knew what was happening. He cried like a toddler for the whole journey and kicked god knows how many dents in the bodywork until we pulled off the main road about a mile after Carloway and stopped at the part-tarmaced square that served as a car park for visitors to the Broch. Sorley had his thick arm around Feeney's neck and part-led, part-carried him up the stone-chipped path and dumped him, ghost-faced and quivering, in the same place he'd taken Annie. There was a smell of shit and the front of his trousers were soaked. I lit a smoke, pulled heavily on it and worked my way through it in complete silence before stubbing it out on the moist earth in front of him.

'You been wondering where this got to Ed?' his eyes widened as I held up the phone. 'There's some interesting stuff on here. More interesting than you probably remember.' I flicked through the pictures and the websites I'd accessed. 'Inspector MacDonald would be delighted to get hold of this especially after all the time of his you wasted before. And remember that big smile you gave him when you were leaving court? I bet that's still etched on his memory.'

'So here's what's going to happen. You're going away for a while, for a spot of fishing. It'll be the making of you and, more to the point, it'll teach you how to work hard and stop treating people like dirt. And I'm going to hang on to your phone as a bit of, eh, insurance just in case you think of doing something daft when you come back.'

*

As Sorley heaves at the oars and we get closer to the trawler I see Grigor standing, torch in hand, and a rope ladder being hoisted over the side. I pick up a rucksack filled with some basic clothes and toiletries and hand it to Feeney, 'Here, I took the liberty.'

Another peek of moonlight illuminates the Broch and I feel a spot of rain on my face just as Sorley pushes us away from the side of the boat.

It's torrential when we park the car and, jackets up over our heads, race into The Star Inn. It's characteristically drab and the rain pelting against the windows doesn't do anything to lift the

sense of institutionalised despair. Old fisherman, who haven't been near a trawler for years, spending money they don't have and fat Alex watching sky sports while his wife is being smooched by the soft-drinks salesman from Inverness. She might as well take that skirt off for all the use it is. Sorley's in heaven. He's stuffing the puggy, nearly finished the pint I've just bought him, with another sitting beside it, and on a promise from a half-bottle and a well leafed copy of Razzle when he gets home.