

What Scotland Taught Me

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For my dad, who always hates it when the heroine rejects the intelligent, reliable suitor in favor
of the irresponsible, romantic outsider,
For Deborah Anderson in Tennessee, the first to believe in and champion this story,
And, as always, for Steve, who may be the only person in the world perfectly suited to put up
with me.

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From ghoulies and ghosties

And long-leggedy beasties

And things that go bump in the night,

Good Lord, deliver us!

- Traditional Scottish prayer

Chapter One: Somewhere Over Greenland

Amber slid a note onto my knee, jarring me out of my obsessive thoughts. As the plane's engines droned in my ears like wasps, I wiped my sweaty palms and picked up the quarter-sheet of notebook paper, torn neatly along the edges. The reading light over my head cast a circle of brightness onto the words. "Three things you want to do in Scotland," my cousin Shannon's tidy handwriting said across the top. She had underlined it, and left the rest of the page blank.

Okay. Good. A distraction from middle-of-the-night musings on how this plane might crash into a glacier in Greenland. Or how I already missed my parents and my dog, back in Oregon. Or the small detail that none of us had ever been to Scotland before, and we ought to be starting college right now, not jetting off to the UK, so what the hell were we thinking?

And then there was the whole issue about my boyfriend Tony...

Deep breath.

My three best friends were in this lifeboat (or 747) with me, I reminded myself. Friends helped.

I looked to my left and found Amber studying a note similar to mine, her sparkly blue thumbnail tapping her lips.

Shannon handed me another note across Amber's chest. "Here. Pass it to Laurence."

I turned to my right, expecting Laurence to be asleep. A while back he had thrown his long brown coat over himself, coughing and snorting, and tried to curl his tall frame into the seat. But now his arm emerged, plucked the paper from me, and descended back into his cocoon. All I could see was his reddish-blond hair, ruffled from his attempts to get comfortable with the dinky airline pillow.

"Little late for a pop quiz," I told Shannon.

She was already filling out her own answers with her clear-cased blue pen. "We weren't sleeping anyway."

We should have been, as it was somewhere around two A.M. in this time zone. But Shannon herself looked awake and perky. My favorite cousin shared many of my Scandinavia-descended genes, but unlike me, she had received most of the ones coded for "hot." The fuzz on her periwinkle sweater hadn't matted yet, and her lemonade-blonde curls kept their gloss even in the soullessly dry air of the airplane cabin.

I didn't have to touch my head to know that my own hair was doing its "straight yet frizzy" trick. It diffused light at the edge of my vision, as if I were living inside a cloud of smog the color of dead grass.

Shannon glanced at me. "Go on, Eva. Fill it out."

“I don’t have a--” I started to say, but Laurence cut me off by handing me a ballpoint pen. He sniffled, holding a tissue against his nostrils.

“Gosh. The creature awakens.” I held the pen at a distance between thumb and forefinger. “Got any antiseptic wipes?”

“I’m. Not. Contagious,” he told me from behind the tissue. “It’s a sinus infection.”

I rubbed the pen along my jeans. “So you claim. If you get us all sick before we even land, I’m going to maim you.”

With the mechanical pencil he always kept in his pocket, Laurence pretended to jot something down on his note and said, “Task Number One to accomplish in Edinburgh: murder Eva. Make it look like an accident.”

“Give it a rest, you guys.” Amber yawned, scrawling her own answers with a purple felt-tip pen. She paused to lean across me and pat Laurence’s knee. “I’m sorry you don’t feel good, Laurence. Eva is too. She’s just suffering from instant-message withdrawal.”

“I’m not--” I bit off the denial and hunched down in my seat, clutching my pop quiz.

We’d been assigned to that hellish middle set of seats on the plane where nobody gets a window seat and hardly anyone gets an aisle seat. I was only 5’2” and I still didn’t have enough leg room. No wonder Laurence, a full foot taller than me, felt crabby.

In these cramped quarters I did long for the escape of my cell phone and its glimpses into the vast world of the Internet. I ached to drown my mind in stupidly funny websites and emails. But you weren’t allowed to use cells on planes, and even if you were, our American phones wouldn’t work in the UK. (You should have heard Laurence’s technical explanation as to why. It lulled me to sleep within a minute.)

We’d be getting new phones in Edinburgh, and I felt tempted to write that down as the first thing I wanted to do. Pathetic, really. I wasn’t one of those teenagers who texted her friends during class and went two thousand minutes over her plan every month. But leaving home in a major way for the first time was precisely when you needed a lifeline like a cell phone, and it felt unsettling not to have one.

“Are you guys done?” asked Shannon, almost bouncing in her seat with excitement.

Come to think of it, her pop quizzes usually arrived via text or email. Felt sort of retro to see one on notebook paper.

“Yep,” said Amber.

“Just about.” Laurence coughed.

“Give me a sec,” I mumbled. I set pen to paper, on my knee, and let my instincts dictate my answers.

- 1. Do my college applications.*
- 2. Make friends with an actual Scottish person.*
- 3. Decide whether to stay with Tony.*

I wrote the third item with heart and hand jittering. My friends liked Tony, on the whole. They'd be startled to hear I might dump him. But I had to work out the dilemma, and bouncing the problem off them ought to churn up some perspective for me.

As to the other answers, well, the college one was a no-brainer. Deadlines were fast approaching for the following year, and I had a big decision to make. My second item required no soul-searching either. Scottish accents! Oooh! From Sean Connery to Ewan McGregor, I'd never heard one that didn't activate my drool glands. And if my proposed new Scottish friend was male...hmm, then I'd definitely have to achieve point number three on my list.

"Hand them to your right," Shannon said.

Great. Laurence would be seeing my answers first. I handed my note over as he shuttled his down to Shannon. Amber's answers landed in my lap. I tried to focus on those, but Laurence's voice invaded my concentration.

"Whoa, Eve! You kilt-chasing little heartbreaker." My friends sometimes called me "Eve" instead of "Eva" to save a syllable--for instance, when they were rushing to insult me.

Shannon and Amber snapped their heads up.

"Let's read them all first," I muttered.

"Okay," he chuckled, launching himself into a coughing fit. Served him right.

Scowling, I pulled my attention to Amber's answers. Her first two priorities were no surprise:

1. Try Scotch.

2. See Scottish ghosts.

At parties where someone got hold of alcohol, Shannon, Laurence, and I hesitantly sipped watery beer while Amber gleefully accepted shots of tequila until she needed to be pulled away from the arms and sloppy mouth of some guy she just met--usually our job. Her eagerness to imbibe Scotch whisky, therefore, fit right into her usual pursuits. At least in Scotland we were, at eighteen, of legal drinking age.

And ghosts were the whole reason we were going--originally, anyway. Amber had seen ghosts all her life, or so she claimed. I believed her, though in over ten years of sneaking out with her to cemeteries or abandoned houses, I had never seen a ghost myself, not even when she pointed and insisted in a trembling voice that it was *right there*.

Last year while channel surfing she caught a documentary about haunted places in Scotland. It hooked her within minutes. Apparently Edinburgh's ghosts were world-famous and she simply had to see them. A little pushing, prodding, and eyelash-batting on her part and the rest of us climbed on board too.

But her third item did surprise me:

3. Find my dad.

Amber's father had left when she was a baby. She had never met him. Since her mom didn't like to speak of him, all Amber had to go on was a couple of photos from the eighties. We had all studied them and speculated about him. He looked like Amber, with panther-black hair and dark good looks that would have been attributed to "gypsy blood" in old novels. Maybe he was a

daredevil, like her. Maybe a womanizer. Who knew? To my knowledge, she had no idea where he was these days, and in any case had come to resent him as she grew up. So I looked aside at her in surprise to find that wish on her list.

She regarded me with a cool glance, and shrugged. The pop quiz rules dictated we didn't open the discussion till we had all read everyone else's answers. She settled back in the seat, tucking a lock of her long hair into the rainbow-hued gauzy scarf she wore in lieu of a headband.

Shannon glanced along the row. "Rotate."

We shifted the notes to the right again. Now Shannon held mine and I heard her gasp, surely at my disloyal Item Number Three. Rather than look up, I focused on her list.

1. *Get involved with local theater.*
2. *Make enough money to keep my cell phone and still buy groceries.*
3. *Kiss a local guy.*

Again, only the third was even remotely surprising, and then not very. One would hope that in six months abroad in a country rich with sexy accents, a beauty like Shannon would kiss *someone*. The second item was just silly. Only Shannon would bother writing down something we would all try to do as a matter of course. The first almost went without saying, too. Her passion was textiles--sewing, clothes-making, anything with needles and fabrics--and she especially enjoyed costuming. I'd be surprised if she *didn't* knock on some theater door and beg to stitch tunics together for their next Euripides production.

"Rotate," she said.

Laurence's list arrived in my hands. Mine reached Amber's, who uttered only a low chuckle. She didn't like Tony as well as the others did. Tony was Catholic, which she, as a free-wheeling, ghost-hunting pagan, couldn't abide. (Shannon and I were Catholic too, but only in that lackadaisical "I go to Mass once in a while and never to confession" kind of way.)

Amber's smug smile made me simmer. I longed to defend Tony, even though I was the one bringing up the idea of dumping him.

"Eve?" said Shannon. "Done reading?"

"Oh. Um..." I squinted at Laurence's angular handwriting.

1. *Get a job unrelated to chemistry (might be my last chance).*
2. *See the Highlands.*
3. *Do something I wouldn't do at home.*

"Gosh," I said. "Something you wouldn't do at home. Mix chemicals without safety glasses?"

"I think he's deciding which of us to seduce as a one-time fling," Amber said. "Am I right?"

He slipped off his glasses and winked at her, which looked absurd with his eyes all puffy. "A gentleman would never say."

"Vomiting a little here," I said.

"We'll get to *your* pathologies in a minute," he answered.

“I think we should save Eva’s till last,” Shannon said, which meant she viewed it as the most serious.

I panicked. “No, no, no. You guys have more important ones. Like this thing Laurence normally wouldn’t do, what’s that?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t decided yet. Next?”

“Well, yours, Shannon.” I turned in my seat to face her. “Kissing the local guy. That’s exciting. Talk about that.”

She gave me one of her soothing but stubborn smiles. “It isn’t exciting right now. It might be once it happens.”

“Then Amber’s.” I laid my clammy hand on her arm, feeling a tickle against my palm from the midnight blue sequins winding down her denim jacket sleeve. “Finding your dad. Come on. That’s way more important.”

“Yeah, let’s hear about that,” Laurence said.

Amber shrugged. “I found an email from him on my mom’s computer. It was just a thingy about the old alimony account closing, but his sig file had all his info. He’s a techie of some kind. He lives in Leeds, England. I looked it up. It’s only a few hours from Edinburgh, by train.”

“Wow,” I said.

“Have you emailed him yet?” asked Shannon.

“Nope. Waiting till we get over there.”

“And I’m guessing Mama doesn’t know,” Laurence said.

“Right ho, Jeeves.”

“So you don’t hate him?” I asked.

“I want to give him a chance, hear his side of things. If he’ll speak to me.”

“That’s big,” I said. “Potentially life-changing.”

She turned her shrewd hazel eyes to me--amber eyes, actually, in the right light--and narrowed them as she smiled. “Which doesn’t mean we’ve forgotten *your* answer, girl. So, fed up with Saint Anthony?”

“No! Anthony--Tony--is awesome. I’ll miss him the whole time. But six months...”

“Is an awfully long time to go without the touchy-touchy,” Laurence said.

“Shut up. We don’t--I mean, we haven’t...ugh. It’s not like I want to go screw some Scottish guy.”

“You just want to make *friends* with one.” Amber grinned and licked her upper lip.

Shannon nudged her arm, smiling. “Be nice.”

“Well, you guys all get to!” I said. “I’m the only one with a significant other back home. It isn’t fair. I’ll be watching you all flirt with the local hotties, and instead of getting to join you, I’ll be the dorky spinster in the corner with my tea.”

Laurence blew his nose, rendering his voice less stuffy when he spoke. “If you’re having such Earl-Grey-tinted phobias, why didn’t you break up with Tony before you left?”

“Because he’s great. And I’m fine with the idea of staying with him. I just...”

“Want an open relationship?” said Amber.

“Basically. For now. But he’d never consent to that.”

“He does seem the virtuous and monogamous type,” Shannon said.

Amber drew her foot up onto the seat and tapped my pop quiz against her knee. “How about asking him to break up temporarily? So you’re free to snog a laddie in a kilt?”

“Oh, like he’d take me back after that.”

“Do you care?” Amber asked.

“Yes! I don’t want to hurt him, or lose him too soon. But I don’t want to put all my eggs in his basket either.”

An explosive snicker from Laurence launched him into another spasm of coughing. “Eggs,” he managed. “All your eggs. Sorry.”

I whacked him on the arm before he could improvise any remark about sperm as well.

“It sounds like you don’t know what you want.” Shannon, at least, sounded sympathetic.

“How can I, when all I know about relationships is that my first one *wasn’t* good, and my second one might only be a rebound?”

“And why are you asking us,” Amber added, “when none of us have had relationships as long as either of yours?”

“Totally. Big fat lot of good you guys are.”

“Maybe once you do meet someone in Scotland,” Shannon said, “you could bring it up with Tony.”

“I don’t know.” Amber scrunched up her nose, fanning herself with my pop quiz. “I say break up with him. Offer the getting back together later, if you want, but make it clean.”

“I think you should at least float the open relationship thing with him,” said Shannon. “You never know. He might go for it. Then he could date someone, too.”

I chewed at a dry patch on my lip. “Possibly.”

“Laurence?” said Amber. “Your vote?”

He slid a glance at me from behind his titanium-frame glasses, a smirk lingering on his lips. As I glared back, the amusement in his green eyes shifted to malice. “Wouldn’t want to juggle too many guys at once,” he said. “Your eggs might get scrambled.”

While Amber and Shannon snickered, I whacked him again harder.

Chapter Two: Hostel Beginnings

The four of us grew up together in the little town of Wild Rose, Oregon, and we'd been friends since kindergarten. But life was poised to split us up after this transatlantic jaunt.

Laurence had a clutch of expensive, nerdy schools like MIT and Cal Tech lined up to snatch him away. Shannon and I reckoned we'd attend a university or community college in Oregon. Amber, diffident on higher education, claimed she wanted to go straight to some exciting career involving travel, fashion, or the supernatural. (No, I didn't think many people got paid for that last one, but she kept hope alive.)

Chances were, once we settled into our new lifestyles we'd form other attachments, and start losing touch with each other despite our best intentions. This six-month trip was, in short, our final guaranteed adventure as a foursome, and we were determined to create some never-fading memories out of it. Plus, we hoped to make a little money overseas so we wouldn't return home completely broke.

We still hadn't found our Edinburgh jobs, but we'd tackle that issue tomorrow. Settling into our accommodations came first. And I can't speak for my friends, but when I staggered out of the Edinburgh Airport on stiff legs, my shoulders laden with bags, dropping into bed was the only prospect that appealed to me.

A cab brought us into the city and left us on a sidewalk with our luggage. The smell of fresh, cool September rain filled my nose, the same scent here as in rainy Oregon. But the similarities ended there. On a jagged black cliff a few blocks to our left loomed Edinburgh Castle, towering over the treetops. A massive relic from the Middle Ages, there it still stood as the city's centerpiece, skirted by green public gardens and narrow lanes of traffic. It was more sinister and more gorgeous than any building I had ever seen. Staring at it both exhilarated and nauseated me. We were definitely not in Oregon anymore.

I turned away and peered up through the misty rain at the exterior of our youth hostel, a five-story stone building rich in decorative brick with tall windows.

Amber bounced on her heels. "Can you guys believe it? We get to live here!"

"The outside's pretty at least," I admitted.

She picked up her suitcase. "You guys have nice houses. You don't understand. This is huge for me; I grew up in a trailer."

We followed her through double glass doors. "But it's a pleasant trailer," I said. "Not a trashy one."

"Yeah," Shannon said. "I mean, it's a double-wide."

We fell silent as we looked around the lobby, waiting our turn behind other new arrivals.

We had cased the joint via the Internet, of course. We knew we'd be sharing a big room with several other travelers, and that the furnishings were sparse and shabby in a weird 1700s-meets-1970s kind of way. But it was cheap and temporary. And anyway, in questioning the hostel staff via email, we'd been tickled by their use of spellings like "humour" and "centre" and phrases like "you and your mates."

We thought those were examples of British usage. You know, this being Great Britain and all.

Turned out they were Australian. No mistaking the accent on that long-haired guy manning the front counter with a cheery grin, or the tall redheaded girl who dashed in to ask him a question and then dashed out. Aussies overseeing our Scottish accommodations? I felt cheated.

And while I knew there would be other lodgers in the hostel about our age and from all countries, I guess I had pictured them studying maps, learning about architecture, and traipsing the city with tidy haircuts and a healthy glow to their cheeks.

I didn't picture the alcohol-fragranced young man with a two-day beard, leaning on the end of the counter and talking in French to the barefoot pasty blonde chick with a nose ring. Or the dreadlocked white girl with an unfamiliar accent, whining to her friend that she was *so wasted* last night.

The Australian behind the counter was busy helping two Japanese travelers ahead of us. They barely spoke English, and the Aussie's broad accent wasn't helping. After waiting beside them and listening to the confused exchange for a minute, Laurence contributed a phrase in Japanese. He had learned it in high school, and practiced it with foreign colleagues of his father's. The two Japanese kids beamed at him and nodded.

Laurence asked them something else, then told the Aussie, "They want to know if there's a place to store their luggage."

The light dawned on the Aussie's face. "Ah, right!" he said. "Thanks, mate. Yeah, there are lockers upstairs, but you've got to pay for 'em. There are closets in the rooms, but it's first-come, first-served."

Laurence translated this. The Japanese travelers consented, paid their fees, and hauled their stuff up the stairs.

"Show-off," I muttered as we took their place at the counter.

"Nah, man, that was great!" The Australian grinned at Laurence. "You want a job here?"

Laurence shot him an "Are you kidding me?" look, and moved straight to the main topic. "We have reservations. Hawthorn."

The Aussie located us in the logbook. "Laurence Hawthorn, Amber Willock, Eva Sonneborn, Shannon Stover," he said. "I put you all in number 17, on the third floor. That's a twelver, so there are eight others in there when we're full up."

I had been prepared to room with my friends and any congenial strangers, but having glimpsed the clientele, my enthusiasm nose-dived. I'd always had a room of my own till now. My one sibling, Gina, hadn't been born until I was eight, and we had separate bedrooms from the

start. Jumping from that to sleeping alongside a bunch of drunk, foreign twenty-somethings? *Ick*, in a word.

My three friends shared my dismay, to judge from their expressions, but we weren't about to go gallivanting in the rain again with all our luggage.

Amber squared her shoulders and put a smile back on. "Well, it's still a gorgeous building."

"It'll be an adventure," Shannon agreed. Easy for her to say. She had four younger siblings back home, two of whom shared her room. Being free of them, and their babysitting and tailoring needs, would be a godsend no matter who she had to bunk with.

Laurence, meanwhile, probably felt as nettled as I did. He lived in a spacious old house with only his dad. His mom had died of cancer when we were freshmen.

Whatever his regrets now, Laurence unfolded some British bank notes and dropped them on the counter. "All right. I'm too tired to argue." He put away his wallet and told us, "That's for tonight. You can pay me back." He hefted his duffel bag over his shoulder and trudged up the stairs.

"Confusing place," I said as we climbed to the third floor.

The staircases zigzagged up and up, and each floor had an unnecessarily high ceiling but limited living space. It seemed that in the UK you didn't rent one level of a building; rather, you rented a vertical slice of the whole thing. We shoved through four swinging doors before we reached the third floor corridor, at the end of which a set of stairs went up and then stopped at a blank wall.

"Hel-lo, Winchester Mystery House," said Shannon.

"Must have been remodeled," Amber said. "The outside of the building matched the rest of the neighborhood. Georgian, you know, couple hundred years old. They must have cleared the insides and divvied it up. Wonder what it used to be."

"Don't know, but if it's 200 years old, someone probably died here," said Shannon. "You might be able to see ghosts in our very room."

Our very room, number 17, had no lock on the door.

"Another bad sign," Laurence muttered, leading us inside.

The room was the size of a large classroom, painted in a pale greenish shade, with fluorescent tube lights on the high ceiling. These buzzed when Amber hit the switch, and we all looked up and cringed.

"What a waste of potential chandelier space," she said.

Sets of bunk beds stood around the walls, along with two inadequate wardrobes. Clothing already spilled out of these, and open suitcases on the carpet were clearly being lived out of. The smell of over-breathed air and cigarette smoke clung to the curtains--cheap scholastic style, thick and brownish. The hostel forbade smoking in the rooms, but people obviously disregarded that rule judging from the lingering smell and the cereal dish on the windowsill holding several extinguished butts.

Laurence nudged Amber. "How's that trailer looking now?"

She swung to face us, setting her face into its bravest lines. “This is only temporary. Remember?”

I pulled my foot away from a blackish-brown stain on the carpet. “Not likely to forget.”

“We’ll work something out,” Shannon said. “We just need to get our bearings.”

Rather than contribute to the optimism, Laurence blew his nose.

Amber marched forward and slung her bag down next to an empty bed. “I claim the top bunk.”

Shannon slid her backpack off. “Bottom’s mine.”

I trudged to a neighboring bed and dropped my luggage on the floor.

The room was too hot. I pulled off my coat and went to the window, hoping to God it would open. It did, and furthermore, it had no screen. *Suicide would be a cinch here*, I thought wryly, peering down at the traffic and concrete four stories below. (What they called the third floor was actually the fourth, in American terms. They counted the ground as Floor Zero, not Floor One.)

A few breaths of the rain-cleansed air eased my nerves. To steady myself further, I gazed at a park nearby, an expanse of grass with oaks, pines, and other trees marching up a steep slope. On top of the ridge sat a crowded line of pointed church spires and dark medieval buildings. I stuck my head out the window to see around the edge of our hostel. Sure enough, at the high end of the slope stood Edinburgh Castle, gray and grandiose in the rain clouds.

Okay, so the view was nice. I hopped down, found my digital camera in my suitcase, and leaned out the window again for a shot. Click-click. I examined the photo on the camera’s display: dim and gray.

“I’m going to take a nap,” Shannon said behind me, yawning.

“Me too,” murmured Amber.

I switched off the camera and drew my head in. “Same here.”

On the bunk below mine, Laurence already breathed like one deep in slumber, covered in the slate-blue duvet the hostel provided.

Before I could climb to my bunk, the tall redheaded Aussie chick dashed into our room, holding a slip of paper. “Which of you is Eva?”

I raised my hand.

She brought me the paper. “Forgot, down there. You had a phone message waiting.” Out she dashed again.

I unfolded the note.

Tony says call as soon as you get in.

I grimaced at Shannon and Amber, who, having read it over my shoulder, retreated with smiles--sympathetic on Shannon, teasing on Amber.

I stuffed the note into my jeans pocket. “Guess I better go see if it’s serious.”

While my lucky friends climbed into bed for a nap, I trudged downstairs to find a pay phone

and figure out how the hell to use it.

Chapter Three: Enter Gilleon

Imagining some calamity to my family in the past twelve hours, I dialed Tony's cell number, even though it was four in the morning in Oregon.

Scarier yet, he answered.

He sounded sleepy. "Oh, good. I left the phone on in case you called."

"What is it? Is anything wrong?"

"No, I just wanted to say hi, and I miss you," Tony said. "I told them that, at the hostel. Didn't they put that in the message? Silly people."

Ugh.

We only spoke for about five minutes. The cost of the call staggered me as it reeled away in pounds and pence on the little screen, and besides, I required a nap in a dire way. So, darn, no chance to bring up that open relationship thing.

Could I be more of a coward?

The next day I stood with my three companions outside a mobile phone dealer on Princes Street, the city's main shopping drag. The rain had given way to mild autumn sunshine. As pedestrians flowed around us and tall red-and-white buses whooshed past, we thumbed intently at our new devices, swapping them like playing cards.

"Okay, Shannon, give me yours."

"There. My number's entered. Got Amber's?"

"Here, I'll put in Laurence's."

"Thanks."

"Now, ladies," Laurence said, as we all recovered our own phones, "I got the best plan I could, but international calls or texts are still going to cost limbs. Accessing the email app isn't cheap either. Use sparingly."

"Okay, Dad," I said.

"Or you're grounded," he added.

"Are you done? Some of us need to go job-hunting."

We three girls had dressed for interviews--blazers, button-up blouses, dark pants, neutral tints of eye makeup. My pants, like most pants, were too long on me, and the hem kept snagging on the stitching of my leather oxfords. My white shirt rumbled itself up inside my jacket every time I moved, making my armpits itch. Amber and Shannon, in contrast, looked like models out of the work-abroad brochure. Shannon stood slim and straight like a Hitchcock blonde in her gray suit.

Amber wore a burgundy jacket over a rose blouse, somehow making those tints not only work together, but set off her tan skin.

“You should come, Laur,” Amber said. “You need to find your chemical-free career.”

He waved us away. “Not today. I’m going to brave that grocery store we passed earlier. See you at the hostel.” He strolled off, tweedy blazer flapping open in the breeze. He’d worn jeans, anyway. Totally not the thing for interviews.

Shannon, Amber, and I dashed across the street to Princes Street Gardens, the vale of green below Edinburgh Castle, and claimed a park bench, where we immediately got down to business: checking and sending messages.

Naturally I had email from Tony.

Good to talk to you last night, Mutton-Feet, it said. We had a running contest to come up with unflattering pet names for each other. I miss you hugely and tons--or is that “tonnes” now? Eat a scone for me. Love, Tony.

I smiled and started tapping keys in answer.

Dear Horse Breath: Yay, we have phones! So first, here’s the number.

As everyone knows, typing email on a cell phone is a bitch. It took me at least twenty minutes to compose the normal arriving-in-Edinburgh part of my message. My fingers were cramping up by the time Amber stretched and said, “All right. Let’s hunt us some jobs.”

“Hang on a sec,” said Shannon, deep within a message.

“I’m game,” I said. I typed, *Gotta go. Tell my folks I’m OK*, then sent the email.

I felt bad for not emailing my parents first, but they would understand. They loved Tony, which was handy. For a teenager, I harbored remarkably little family drama. My sister and I argued over stupid things every week, but we didn’t draw blood. Dad taught third and fourth grade, and Mom taught high school science, so they witnessed worse kids than us on a daily basis.

“Having examined this map for at least fifteen seconds,” Amber said, “I think I can guide us to the student employment office.”

Shannon finally set down her phone with a sigh. “Good. All right, I’m ready.”

“How’s the fam?” asked Amber.

“Not bad. They’ve survived a full forty-eight hours without me, so I have hope.”

“Shannon, darling,” I said, “I think one of your goals for Scotland should be ‘Quit worrying about what’s going on in Wild Rose for ten minutes each day.’”

She smiled as she tucked her phone into her practical gray-and-black purse. “Well, I get to be in Scotland, and they don’t. I feel kind of sorry for them.”

“Damn straight.” Amber stuffed the street map into her pocket, and glanced at me. “Asked Tony if he’ll sanction a fling with a Scottish hottie?”

“Not yet. Jeez. Emailed your dad?”

Her eyes widened. Instantly I felt bad for throwing a sensitive question back at her. It wasn't her fault I was such a wimp.

But she smiled, stretched her arms behind her neck, and answered in a perfect echo of my voice, "Not yet. Jeez."

* * *

I clinked a tumbler of Irish cream against Amber's shot glass, and then leaned across her to tap it against the paper umbrella in Shannon's cocktail. "To us. To jobs in bonnie Scotland."

"To us!" Amber downed half her whisky. "Mm. Smoky."

"To pubs and hotels for hiring us." Shannon sipped her drink, sticking out her pinky.

I lifted my glass, enjoying the ice chips and milky sweetness that slid into my mouth. In my limited experience so far, Irish cream was one of the only alcoholic drinks I had not wanted to spit out.

The webpage for the work-abroad program had contained a gallery full of photos of triumphant young Americans at their British jobs. Wearing crisp business suits, they beamed out at us from posh offices and majestic government buildings, promising a world of happiness and high-paying work in the UK's temporary-job market. Well, good for them. But when *we* opened that notebook of available employers at the actual work-abroad agency, we found it brimming with pizza parlors, pubs, and hotels--the tourism industry, all the way.

"Most high-school graduates do take an entry-level job at first," Shannon had pointed out.

"And it's still a *Scottish* entry-level job," conceded Amber. "That's what counts."

So, hoping future employers would only notice the ultimate coolness of the Edinburgh address behind the title "kitchen assistant" on my resume, I had accepted the only job offered to me today after six hours of visiting the candidates.

Shannon and Amber had done likewise in terms of quality, though they landed different job titles. Having reconvened, we now sat in Borthwick's Tavern on the Royal Mile, the medieval high street that ran from Edinburgh Castle down to Holyrood Palace. We hadn't seen Laurence all afternoon, so we'd texted him with our news and sallied forth without him.

The pub looked like the British pubs I'd seen in movies: dark paneling, dim lights, a fire in the fireplace, a long mirror behind the bar, and posters for whisky and beer on the walls.

"What's the name of your place again?" Amber asked me, raising her voice to counter the jukebox, which was playing a '90s hit by Blur.

"The Monteith Hotel. Scrubbing dishes and serving coffee, baby."

"Sweet." She turned to Shannon. "And you're at the MacCloud or MacClap or..."

Shannon speared a maraschino cherry with her umbrella's toothpick. "McCreadie Guest House. Chambermaid."

"And here's my scene." Amber lifted her gaze to the rows of whisky bottles over the bar's

mirrors. “Pub life. Guess I’ll finally have to learn what goes into a Long Island Iced Tea.”

The pub that hired Amber, she reported, was smaller, quieter, and drearier than this one--“a local favorite of the Bingo crowd,” she claimed. But it was only a five-minute walk from the hostel, and didn’t require her to get up before ten a.m., which sold her on the prospect.

We sipped our drinks for the next half hour, yelling comments to each other and rating the music. Blur, U2, and Arcade Fire, we approved of. Journey, Spice Girls, and Matchbox Twenty, not so much. A few good-looking guys hung around the place, but we didn’t approach them; we just nudged each other and giggled.

Then, horror of horrors, a man approached me. Shannon had gone to the restroom, leaving only Amber to defend me. He was at least thirty years old, with a missing tooth, a beer gut, and a carpet of chest hair spilling from his rugby shirt.

He slouched on the bar beside me. The smells of alcohol and armpit wafted off him.

“How ya doing?” he asked, in a broad Australian accent. Now that I was in Scotland, I was meeting more Australians than ever.

“Swell,” I said.

“I think you’d want to come home with me, you know,” he said. “My music’s better than this.”

“Mm.” I studied the Guinness poster on the far wall of the pub.

He tugged my braid. “I like your hair. All blonde and soft, like.”

And freshly contaminated with sleaze cooties. I slid away, nearly falling off my barstool.

Amber blasted him with a glare, which he didn’t notice.

“Aren’t you going to look at me?” my swain persisted.

As I calculated the nicest way to say, “Get lost,” a crisp Scottish voice behind me spoke up.

“Don’t mind him, love. He’s guttered.”

I turned. One of the bartenders, a lad about my age with a wildly patterned shirt, leaned against the brass rail and smiled at me.

His hair was shoulder-length and brown, with the top half pulled back into a ponytail. When we had ordered our drinks, I muttered to Shannon that it was the stupidest possible way a guy could wear his hair. We also agreed nobody should wear a shirt like that, which looked like a traffic signal thrown into a blender. But now, noticing his lovely blue eyes and clean teeth, I felt inclined to be more generous.

“Just thwack him one with a chair if he keeps at it,” he added, and scooted off to fetch someone a drink.

He didn’t actually pronounce the final t’s in “at it,” nor had he pronounced the double t in “guttered”; he sort of skipped over them. During my job hunt today, I’d noticed that pattern in casual Scottish speech: a disregard for t’s, made up for by an extra roll of r’s.

“Thinks he’s a big man or something,” said the Australian. “Ter, fine, just ’cause I don’t fancy trouble...” He lurched off and presumably found a table to sleep under.

I spun on my barstool to smile at the lad who had come to my defense. “Thank you.”

He scooped three pound coins off the bar and brought them to the cash register. “Aye, not a problem. He’s in here constantly, seems. I say he needs deporting.”

I required a second’s delay after each phrase to translate the words under his accent, but I didn’t mind the difficulty. He had the prettiest accent, and one of the prettiest voices, I’d ever heard. A quieter jukebox song--“Don’t Dream It’s Over” by Crowded House--made it easier to hear for the moment, too.

“We just got into town,” I told him. “Yesterday. Didn’t know we’d be meeting so many Australians.”

He nodded. “Can’t walk round a corner without falling over one. I’m a rare beastie, an actual Scotsman working at an Embra pub.” “Embra” was more or less how Scots said “Edinburgh.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Kell,” he answered--or something like that.

“Kell?”

“Gil. G-i-l. Short for Gilleon.”

“Oh. Unusual.”

“Aye. It’s an ancient ancestral sort of a name, like.”

Amber, still studying his shirt, asked with concern, “Are you colorblind?”

I snorted and tried not to succumb to a giggle fit.

“Cheeky lass.” He rested his chin on his hand. “Who are you two troublemakers, then?”

“My name’s Amber. And I’m just kidding; I like your shirt, really.” She spoke dryly, so I knew she didn’t like his shirt, really. This made me giggle even more.

He looked at me. I sobered up and said, “I’m Eva. Short for Evangeline.”

“Fancy name for a wee lass.”

“It’s ancestral, like yours. It was my great-grandmother’s name. She whacked two intruders over the head with a rolling pin. Killed one of them. Everyone called her a hero for it. The courts were a lot more sensible back then.”

Oops. Too much information, or at least badly chosen information. He pulled away, keeping an eye on me, then shrugged and whipped a dishtowel onto the bar to wipe up a wet ring. “I’d say something about the violence of Yanks, but truthfully she sounds rather Scottish.”

“How did you know I was American?”

He shuddered. “Oi, with an accent like that?”

“I don’t have an accent, *you* do.”

“Aye, you’re the center of the universe, aren’t you, now?”

We volleyed this banter back and forth for the next hour. Whenever he didn’t have his hands full serving other customers, he returned to me, leaned on the rail, and picked up our conversation. Meanwhile, Shannon stopped to talk to some university students on her way back

from the restroom, and Amber asked a local couple for directions to the site of the old Tolbooth Jail. My two companions took turns pulling on my arm at about nine o'clock.

Mr. Gilleon Leslie had engrossed my attention thoroughly (we had established each other's last names by then), but I decided it would be unseemly to protest. Felt a little early to claim I'd found my one true Scottish flirtation, especially since I hadn't broached the topic with Tony yet. So I put on my coat, and lingered until Gil sauntered over.

"On your way out, then?" he asked.

"Yeah. My friends want to see ghosts."

This apparently didn't strike him as unusual. "Ah, right. The underground tours and such."

"I don't know if we'll catch a tour. Amber just sees ghosts."

"Does she now? Not a skill I'd like to have."

"Me neither. Oh." I fished a pound coin out of my pocket and slid it across the bar to him. "Almost forgot. Good service deserves a good tip."

"Hmm. Listen, come here, I'll tell you something." He leaned across the bar. I leaned close enough to count his eyelashes. "Tips aren't expected at pubs," he said. "Restaurants, aye, but not bars. See, I'm honest. I could've said nothing and cheated a tourist." He slid the coin back toward me.

"I see." I plucked it off the bar and placed it flat in his palm. "Then as a reward for telling me, you get to keep this."

A waver in his eyes suggested that some streak of male pride in him wanted to refuse the coin, but he let my monumental charm win him over. "Thank you," he said.

I began to pull away from the bar, then stopped and drew out my new cell phone. "Here." I spun it to face him. "Enter your number."

His smile spread, lifting the ends of his slender eyebrows. "All right." After tapping in a few digits, he hit the Call button, and a ringtone sounded from within his clothes somewhere--the opening bars to the Beatles' "Day Tripper."

I *definitely* approved.

He extracted his phone from his back pocket, and thumbed the hang-up button. "There. Got yours now, as well."

Heart galloping in triumph--with a touch of panic--I retrieved my phone and stepped back. "Cool. Thanks."

"I'll call you." He made it sound beautifully casual, but looked into my eyes as he said it.

"Thanks," I repeated, like a moron. With a final wave to him, I left the pub with my impatient companions.