



Something to remember

Hamish had worshipped Donald since they were bairns at the local school together. He had never said anything, of course. His friends found it hard enough to express their feelings for lasses. There was no way of articulating his desire for another boy. He had talked to Jock when Jock had started courting Mary, but had got nowhere in his search for words and phrases.

“Och,” Jock said, “she’s canny enough and she kens I’m not averse. But I wouldnae tell her so out loud. Doesnae do to turn their heads, ye see?” Hamish saw. He’d have loved to have turned Donald’s head, especially in his direction, but there didn’t seem to be a way.

They joined the regiment together after Highers. It was that or the fishing boats or university and neither felt cut out for the sea of fish or the sea of knowledge. So they went through basic training and felt proud of their uniform and the history they were taught to see as their own.

The wreath-laying ceremony was such an honour. The minister wrote from home to stress how proud the village would be if their boys were to appear on the small screen. Each of them secretly hoped to be the one to carry the wreath of poppies and lay it on the memorial. Hamish could hardly contain his excitement when he was chosen.

The wind whipped around their faces and he was glad he'd had the forethought to borrow a hat pin from his gran. He never thought of his kilt, even when he stepped up in front of them all and stood respectfully after he'd laid the wreath. The gust of spiteful air whisked the heavy folds sideways and up. He hoped his face as he turned to walk back to the line was not displaying his embarrassment. He must on no account show anything, give any sign that he knew there had been anything wrong. He must not give a signal that would allow the crowds to laugh or give the journalists a chance to bay at his heels. He knew his sergeant wouldn't blame him for the display, but he might well blame him if he wasn't dignified about it.

And yet, he thought, as they stood singing about Christian soldiers or those in peril on the sea or whatever... And yet, it could have been worse. He could have been wearing underpants and that would have been something his fellow soldiers would never have allowed him to live down. Sometimes he put a pair on when the cold got too much for him, but on this day of pride he hadn't dared. He was glad.

Donald approached him later, crossing the training square. No-one had said anything and he'd begun to hope there'd be no comments – and no pictures in the papers. But Donald fell into step beside him and grinned and he knew. Donald was not going to let it pass. He shuddered inwardly. All his dreams and shy admiration and now he was a figure of fun to his idol. But Donald was speaking.

“Ye've a fine pair o' cheeks there, Hamish. I always thought ye might have. And I've always wanted to know if I was right. The wind was my friend today, wasnae it?”

“It wasnae mine!”

“Nonsense – ye're the pride of the regiment. And I'm proud to call you my friend. I'd be proud to call you more than that, Hamish. If...” He stopped, blushing the red of the threads in his tartan and started to move away, every motion betraying anxiety and speed, a running away from what he'd said. But Hamish grabbed his arm and whirled him round.

“Ye'll no get away that easily, Donald,” he said softly, a steel determination underlying the words. “Ye can call me anything ye like, d'ye see?”

And Donald did see, and they walked back to the barracks together, knowing the future could be sweet.



Travelling together

Ken had only come to Waterstones to get a map. The trip up to Scotland would take him off the beaten track and he had no desire to get lost before he found the castle where his cousin's wedding was to be held. He had neither the money nor the inclination to install any kind of GPS in his car and those print-outs from the AA usually led via diversions into delays.

So he headed for the map section but couldn't resist a glance at the sci-fi shelves on his way past. Maybe there would be time to read and relax over the weekend.

A mass of red curls over a slim but muscled body was evidently studying the section in depth. Luscious. And with a shared taste in reading matter.

Ken sighed and continued to 'Maps'. No time for dalliance if he was to set out today. But how he wished... Then again, he consoled himself, the other man might be a raging homophobe or perhaps just choosing a book for a sci-fi loving sister.

Comparing maps of the glens and realising he hadn't brought his reading glasses, Ken sighed again, then noticed a slender hand with a dusting of freckles picking up the map he'd just discarded. A polite voice murmured,

"I don't suppose you'd know which of these would be the best to get me somewhere near Gairloch?"

Ken looked up slowly. Red curls framed enquiring green eyes. The hand that wasn't holding the map was clutching a copy of Terry Pratchett's *Going Postal*.

"I don't," he told the green eyes, quietly drowning in them as he spoke, "but I'm going there myself. Perhaps we can figure it out together?" He gestured with the map he'd almost decided to buy and indicated the coffee bar across the shopping precinct. It was too much to hope they were both going to the wedding, but at least the detour to Waterstones seemed to have led to a meeting of minds.

It turned out they were indeed both going to the wedding. Alasdair was a distant relative of the bride and despite his Scottish name had never ventured across the border. They agreed to travel together and Ken walked out of the shop with his map purchased but no more longing glances at the fiction books. He rather thought his time in the Highlands would be adequately filled.



Writer's block

It was exquisite. The paper, thickly textured and probably hand-made, was deep cream, cut or perhaps torn in squares about the size of the palm of his hand. The sheets, piled into a rough cube, were fastened with a lavender ribbon that crossed and recrossed, finishing with a sophisticated knot and softly trailing ends. The gift came wrapped in gold tissue with a card that read: 'from Hilary, with best wishes.'

Tom phoned his friend. "Thank you! It's lovely! But what's it for?"

"Your birthday, of course. Duh!"

"Well, yeah, I figured that out but what do I do with it? I mean, I never use snail-mail and my phone saves all my messages."

"You know what you were saying last week? About having ideas when you were cooking or watching TV?"

"So?"

"So I thought of this. Dan Sweeney makes them and sells them in his gift shop."

"And he deserves to do well but that still doesn't tell me what it's for. Is it supposed to give me ideas?"

"Stoopid!! You're supposed to keep it in a convenient place. With a pen or pencil. It's a writer's block."

Tom let his fingers caress the surface of his new aide-memoire and wished he could transfer the gesture through the phone to Hilary's skin. "Thank you again," he said. "You can be sure I'll make good use of it." He sighed happily and went in search of a suitable writing implement. It was a most satisfactory present. Somewhere to store his thoughts that would also remind him of the giver; riches indeed.

