

# Chapter 1

The first time she saw him Isa forgot to breathe.

He was standing in the warehouse doorway of the recently established Floating Shops of Kirkwall, gazing in her direction. Low in the sky, the sun slid over his blond hair. For a moment, her limbs refused to move. She mentally made a note of the date, knowing she would always remember this day – May 16th, 1899.

‘Get a move on girl. You’re not paid to stand about gawking.’ Samuel Lierstock, the overseer, a big-set man, his skin mottled and unhealthy, white wisps of hair clinging to his scalp, strode into view.

Isa jumped and spun around. Wiping her brow, she scuttled back to the shelf and dragged down another bolt of cloth. She placed it in the packing case and smoothed the surface with her fingers until Lierstock walked away. By now, other workers blocked her view of the door. Once the way was clear, she found herself looking into the eyes of the stranger. Well aware of her own attractiveness, she tilted her head, tucked a black curl under her scarf and allowed a smile to tug the corners of her lips. Small and wiry she might be, but she had a complexion that glowed with health and the energy of a fireball. She turned back to her work, face burning at her own daring.

‘Who is he?’ she whispered to Bella.

Bella, twenty-six, a fair sized woman, married with three bairns, had taken Isa under her wing from the first day she started at the warehouse. Without asking, she knew who Isa meant.

‘Davie Reid. One of the Raumsey lot. Ye keep yer eyes off the likes of him.’

‘Why?’

‘Ye’re fifteen. Yer mam would go mad. Those lads come here

to sell the whisky they make on that wee island of theirs and they're one step in front of the excise man. Now, there's still ten bales to be packed.'

Already Isa felt as if this day had gone on forever. Her muscles ached, her dress stuck to her back and she had eaten her bread and dripping sandwiches ages ago. Speed made her clumsy. She pulled at a roll of cloth. It slipped from her grasp, hit the floor and rolled open.

'Careful,' whispered Bella. 'Ye don't want to anger Leirstock anymore the day.'

With ragged breath, Isa re-arranged the material. This was a good job, better than being a fisher lassie - gutting and packing herring - or leaving home to go into service on the other side, as the islanders called mainland Scotland. However, she could not concentrate. All she thought of was Davie Reid's eyes. She glanced sideways at the doorway, disappointed to find him gone.

After the bell had rung to signify the end of the shift, the warehouse workers walked home together past the built up area along the sea front. Weary to the bone, they still found enough energy to giggle and tease each other. A wind had whipped up and a few drops of rain splattered against their faces. Isa pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders and fell behind the others.

'Doubt if the ships'll get out tomorrow.' Bella stopped to look up at a sky that pressed downward like a wad of grey cotton wool.

Isa bit her lower lip, stopping a smile. Bad weather could be in her favour. A Raumsey yole would never manage across the Pentland Firth before the storm broke. She asked, 'Can we not watch the floating shops being loaded?' They often did this, marvelling at the stock of groceries, meats, shoes and clothes lining the shelves of the large sailing vessels, ready to be ferried to smaller islands.

'Na, I've got to go tend to me bairns. Ye'd best get off and all.' Above their heads, the sky had become prematurely dark as a storm swept from the north. Oil lamps and candles were already beginning to glow through windows.

‘Aye, I’ll see ye the morn,’ answered Isa. Albert Street and home lay before her, but Isa’s steps were slow.

‘Mind, no dallying. I see the mischief in yer brown eyes,’ Bella called after her. Once her friend disappeared through her own front door Isa changed direction and ran for the harbour. Here the wind blew fiercer, beating waves into a frenzy of foam that rushed towards the pier, breaking over and around the concrete walls and shooting skyward. Men were busy hauling their boats across the cobbles to a point well above high tide mark, since the small harbour was not adequate to protect them.

Abe Olyphant, a friend of Isa’s father, stared from beneath the peak of his cap and chewed his pipe in the side of his mouth. Eyes watering with either the wind or regret that he could no longer assist the younger men, he leaned against a pile of creels.

‘Stay back there.’ He caught Isa by the arm. His hands were aged and gnarled, but his grip was strong.

‘I wasn’t going right down.’ Peering past him, she spotted only local boats, masts swaying. ‘Where’s the Raumsey yole?’

‘The Raumsey lads? Na lass, they don’t tie up here. Sail takes too long, see. They berth across at Scapa Bay and bring the stuff over by horse and cart. And they’ll be staying the night wi’ me.’ He pointed at two men she had not seen before. Both tall and bonny, one was as dark as the other was fair. ‘The Reid brothers,’ said Abe.

She longed to ask the whereabouts of the young lad, but if she showed too much interest, Abe might tell her parents. Not that she worried about her dad, but her mam seemed a bit strange recently as if her mind was on other things. There was little point in upsetting her further. However, Davie Reid would soon be gone. She had to see him again. She just had to. The crush she’d had on a local boy faded like sea mists in the heat of a summer sun. Her brain raced around the possibilities of where Davie might be. Maggie-Jean’s shop was the most likely option.

‘Ye’ll no doubt be having something fine for yer tea?’ she probed.

‘We’ll be having a bit of cod since yer asking.’

‘Should I fetch ye some tatties to go with the cod?’

‘The Raumsey lad’s away for them.’

She kissed the old man on the cheek and giggled at his surprise. ‘Ye’ll not be telling me ma’ and dad, will ye?’ Her head cocked to one side and she grinned.

‘Maybe I will and maybe I’ll not. Get away home and stop yer nonsense.’ In spite of his expression, she heard amusement in his voice. With another giggle and a glance towards the boats, she hitched up her skirts, now sodden around the hem, and hurried back along the street. She leaned forward against the strength of the wind as rain began in earnest, battering her face in its fury. At last, she slipped into the shelter of the shop entrance. Salt encrusted the glass of the upper door so that she was unable to make out individual shapes in the interior. Not knowing if she had missed Davie Reid, Isa wished she had money and an excuse to go inside the shop.

Her shawl was thin and wet. With a shiver, she shoved her hands under her armpits. The door handle turned and the bell jangled above her head. She jumped back, leaned against the wall and took a measured breath, but only an old woman appeared bringing with her a blast of warm, paraffin-scented air.

‘What ye doing here lassie, on a night like this?’ she asked.

‘I’m getting shopping for me ma’.

‘Will ye give me a hand first?’

‘I’m in a hurry.’ Isa would normally have helped, but for now she jumped from one foot to the other, hugging her body, her eyes already back on the door.

‘There’s little respect nowadays.’ Lop-sided with the weight of her bag, the woman sniffed and toiled into the storm,

Above her head, the bell jangled again. Nerves caused her to stumble and in her efforts to right herself her foot caught in her skirt hem and she pitched forward. At the same time the door opened. Someone grasped her by the arms. Once she regained her balance, she looked up and into the face of Davie Reid. All she could manage was a stuttering attempt at apology which sounded like nothing at all.

‘Are ye all right?’ he asked, his eyes trapping hers.

Taller than she by at least a foot, his eyes were as blue as the sea in summer, his cheeks and nose, red. Wet strands of hair stuck to his skin, he smelt of damp clothes and salt air. His breathing was ragged. His hands burned into her flesh. A mole below his right eye did nothing to detract from his attractiveness.

‘I . . . I . . . tripped.’ In spite of the storm raging around them, water running from her hair down the back of her neck and the wet material of her skirt clinging to her legs, she felt safe and warm.

‘Were ye going into the shop?’ His grin was wide, exposing a chipped tooth. In the dying daylight, he appeared more handsome than ever. What in Orkney, they called a ‘bonnie chiel’.

With her eyes on his lips, she shook her head. ‘I’m . . . I’m going home.’ Did he believe her? She had been standing in a shop doorway – waiting.

‘Better pick the tatties up.’ He leaned forward and reached towards the ground, brushing against her as he did so. For the first time she became conscious of the empty straw basket and the potatoes scattered around their feet.

‘I made ye drop them. I’m sorry.’ She hunched down, hands scrabbling, feeling more of a clumsy idiot than ever.

‘It’s fine, I’ll do it.’ His fingers covered hers and she recoiled as if stabbed.

Straightening up, she noticed a flush on his face. Surprised, she realised he too was shy. She rubbed her wet hands down the sides of her dress. The fabric, soaked by rain, did nothing to dry them. She nodded towards the road. ‘I’ll have to go.’

He retrieved the last potato. ‘I’d better go with ye, for ye might trip again. Where do ye live?’

‘Top of the street.’

Once out of the lee, the gale pushed them together. Simultaneously they gave a short embarrassed laugh. He placed an arm across her shoulders, tentatively at first then with more confidence, and they struggled uphill past rows of terraced houses to where she lived. Never having had a boy’s arm around her

before, she became aware of his strength and of the extra pressure of his body each time he drew a breath. Everything else vanished from her mind. She wished she could ask him in but this was impossible. Her parents wouldn't be happy to know she'd been alone in the company of a boy not known to them. Ambitious for her girls, her mother harboured an inner terror of one of them having a child before she wed and, as she said, 'ruin her life'.

'Ye're safe,' he said at last. 'I'd best go help with the boats before they swamp.' He let her go and the warm places where his arm and body had been, remained.

'Th . . . thank ye.' Her mouth dry, her mind searched for something clever to say. She needed to keep him, to hear his voice one more time.

He hesitated then spoke too quickly. 'I'll be back before the weather breaks. I'll see ye then.'

'Yes.' Her hands twisted together and she breathed in, terrified least she sounded too eager.

'I don't know your name,' he said.

'Isa Muirison.'

'Goodnight, Isa Muirison.'

Darkness swallowed him up and the space where he had been left an emptiness. Taking control of herself, she walked through the doorway and into the reality of her life.

The murmured voices Isa heard as she entered fell silent when she opened the door. A tense atmosphere hung in the air. Her mother's eyes were wearier than usual, the planes of her face seemed to droop and her mouth pursed in a line of displeasure. She bunched a cloth in her hands.

Curled up in the only armchair, Annie, her sister, bent her head low over a piece of needlework. Sandy, her father, sat at the table, smoke billowing around him, his face animated. Surprisingly, he smiled at her. Isa had imagined her parents' concern or even anger at her late return.

'We've something to tell ye, lass.' He removed the pipe from his mouth. Martha, her mother, turned to the kitchen range. Cleaning the stove was a chore she performed with zest when

agitated and tonight the stove shone like new.

‘What?’ Isa’s eyes flitted from one face to the other.

‘We’re emigrating to Canada.’ As if he expected her to be pleased, he grinned.

‘Canada?’ The word stuck in her throat.

‘We’re selling the boat, the house, everything. The passage is assisted so it’ll not cost us much.’ Leaning back, he drew on his pipe.

‘Canada . . . when?’ Isa stared at her mother in dismay.

‘Boat sails at the end of the month.’ A martyred sigh escaped Martha’s lips.

‘Ye can’t want to leave . . .’

Her mother’s slim shoulders rose and fell. ‘It’s nothing to do with me. When does anyone ever listen to me?’ Isa was well aware of Martha’s belief that it was a woman’s duty to obey her man regardless of her own wishes, then punish him with her sour attitude and silence.

‘Dad?’ She turned to her father.

‘Next year we’ll be in the twentieth century. A time of change. Canada needs willing workers.’ His face lost its vitality. ‘Say ye’re pleased, lassie.’

‘No, I’m not pleased. We can’t go to Canada – we can’t. It’s too sudden.’

Was it so sudden? Since he left the navy eight years ago Dad had been restless, always telling them stories of the places he had visited, especially Canada. And he was so impulsive. It was just like him to make up his mind and expect everyone else to share his enthusiasm.

‘Annie?’ Isa appealed to the older girl.

‘We always talked about going across the sea one day.’ Annie coughed and pressed her hanky to her mouth.

‘We were wee then. Well, I’m not going!’ Isa rose and ran to the room she shared with her sister, banging the door behind her.

‘If I’d spoken to my folk like that I’d have gotten the back of a hand. But she has a point. Ye shouldn’t have sprung this on her, Sandy.’ Her mother’s raised voice carried through the wall.

Her father, quieter, calmer, far more immovable, had made up his mind.

Isa's knuckles pressed against the sill until they turned white. The window misted with her breathing.

How dare *he* decide *her* future! What *she* thought never mattered.

For a long time she stood watching the mad dance of the ocean and the white capped waves glinting in the moonlight. Cloud formations seemed less dense as the wind tossed them to shreds and dragged them about the sky. The storm was losing ferocity and there was every chance of it blowing itself out by morning. Somewhere in this town was a boy who made her experience new and disturbing feelings and come first light he would be gone. By the time he returned she would be half way across the Atlantic Ocean.

'Someday I'll take ye over the sea,' Dad used to say and the promise had been so exciting – once.

With the money saved during his sailing days, Dad bought a herring boat and moved them all to Kirkwall from their home in Shapinsay. They thought that would be the end of it.

'For God's sake,' he had told his unhappy wife, 'Kirkwall's not the back end of the world. And what's here for the lassies? Marrying poor crofters or fishermen. Ye've always said ye wanted better for them.'

'Aye, I do, but will ye settle then?' Mam had asked. 'We'll be over to the other side next.'

Money had been tight for the first few years. Then the herring swam into his nets, so he had said, and his gamble paid off. Isa knew Mam had always looked forward to getting a proper house and moving from this flat beside the grocer's where she had managed to get a few hours' work a week.

This was not a move to a bigger house, nor to the mainland – it *was* to the other side of the world.

'Isa?' Annie came into the room. 'It might not be that bad.'

'I'm not going!' Isa said, yet knowing in her heart that she had no option. 'And what about ye – what about Luke?'

'Ach I don't love him – not really.'

Isa chewed on the edge of her lip and looked at her sister's face. Annie, the good one, the sensible one, her mother's favourite. 'How do ye know when it is love?'

'I know it's not Luke.' She sat down on the bed. 'Is that what's wrong? Have ye met a lad?'

'Yes.'

'Who – when?'

'Today. One of the Raumsey boys.'

'Today. Then it's nothing. Isa, your dress, there's mud on the skirt.'

A vivid memory of rubbing her earth-covered hands down the sides of her dress flashed through her mind and with it the emotion of the moment. Tears pooled in her eyes and trickled down her cheek.

'Aw, come on. It mightn't be that bad.'

Isa gulped. 'I'll never clap eyes on him again.'

Annie took her sister's face in both her hands, wiped the tears away with her thumbs and gave short laugh. 'Was it not the lad from the lighthouse last week?'

'That's different. What's more, I like Kirkwall. I like working for the floating shops. And ye like the clothes shop – ye're that good with a needle.' She did not add that Annie was not strong enough for anything more physical. 'If we both tell him we'll not go – he'll maybe listen.'

The older girl gave an unhappy laugh. Annie was six years old when Isa was born, and because their mam had been ill for some time after, became more like a little mother. Then came another baby, a boy that died, and Martha had never been quite the same again.

'Ye know he won't. And ye shouldn't upset Mam.'

'Aye, well, *ye'll* never need the back of her hand will ye?'

'I think we should accept things. And ye'd best come through for yer tea. There's black pudding and tatties.' Annie coughed, a deep, tearing cough and pressed her fist to her chest. 'I'll go and see if Mam's got any camphor.'

Annie's bouts of bronchitis were getting worse.  
'I'm not hungry,' Isa said, looking away.

Later that night, when Sandy Muirison opened the bedroom door, his younger daughter, wrapped in a blanket, stared out of the window.

'The storm's dying.' He touched her hair.

She jerked her head away. Her dreams had taken flight in these last few minutes and she resented the intrusion. She had imagined herself on the ship, watching Scotland vanish in the mist, when she heard a voice at her elbow. 'I couldna' let ye go without seeing ye again.'

Davie Reid stood behind her. He was coming with them to a big new future. They would have all the time in the world during the long sail to get to know each other.

'Mam's put yer tea in the oven.' Her father's hand remained in the air where her head had been. When there was no answer, he gave a deep sigh and dropped his hand. 'Ye'll love Canada. Wait and see.' Whether she would or not, there was little she could do about it; there was little any of them could do.

## Chapter 2

Davie, Jamsie and Jack Reid pitted the *Silver Dawn* against the swell. The storm had ended but the sea was still rough, leaving little time for thinking. The boat was one of the smaller yoles – no more than sixteen feet, but the brothers were skilled seamen and the breeze blew fair. On reaching the lee of two skerries, they furled the sails and checked their creels for lobster and crab. Three of the creels had been torn from the attached buoys and flung adrift, but the other six yielded a good catch.

‘Ye’re awfully quiet there, Davie,’ shouted Jamsie above the sound of the sea booming and echoing from the cliff wall. He pushed his cap back on his head and his curls, damp with spray, stuck to his forehead.

Without replying, Davie used his sleeve to wipe the spray from his face, the material rough and wet against his skin. With stiff fingers, he tied string around the pincers of the last lobster and tossed it into the box at the bottom of the boat to scabble among its mates.

Davie, his mind full of the lassie he’d walked home through the storm, began baiting the creels from a basket of small slippery fish. How could he ever forget those large brown eyes in the heart shaped face, the black curls springing in the wind and the way her cheeks flushed when he smiled at her? And she had agreed to see him again.

After he left her, he had run down the road, the tiredness of the day lifting from him. Chrissie Adams, the lass he was expected to marry, never made the blood pound in his veins like Isa Muirison had – Isa, such a slim little madam, she’d been like a bird beneath his arm.

‘Get the sail up,’ Jamsie shouted. His brothers stood, pocketing their pipes, the movement causing the boat to rock. Without losing

balance, they grabbed an oar each and pulled the yole out of the lee. Davie unfurled the brown sail, experiencing the familiar surge of excitement as the wind filled it. Beneath them the sea swelled, the boat rose, pitched forward and descended into the trough, water slapping over the sides. The boys yanked in the oars. Jamsie grabbed the rudder and turned the prow to face the next wave.

Raumsey was near enough to make out the details of Scartongarth, the croft house where they lived. Davie rubbed his fingers together, already imagining the warmth of the peat fire. He could not see Bess, the family collie, but knew she waited on the beach. Long before the boat became visible, she would run up and down, barking. Mam would hear her and get the soup pan on.

It was impossible to sail directly home. Instead, they had to manoeuvre between the treacherous waters of the Swelkie to the north and the Boars to the south where opposing currents met, causing swirling cauldrons of foam and whirlpools. The men who sailed the Pentland Firth knew how to use the tides to their advantage. By sailing with the flow, they made good time. Less than an hour later, they beached the boat, lashed the rope to the iron winch and, taking turns on the handle, dragged the yole over sand and shingle, up the grassy embankment, clear of the highest tides.

Chrissie came running down the incline to meet them; cheeks flushed, skirts hitched up, her voice excited and loud. 'Your mam was that worried when the storm broke yesterday, but I told her, my Davie will know better than to put to sea the night.'

Davie winced at her using the word 'my' before his name and busied himself with the ropes.

'What I wouldn't give to have a lassie like that run to me,' Jamsie laughed, punching his brother lightly on the shoulder. 'Get yourself off - we'll finish here.'

'I'll do my bit.' Davie did not look up hoping Chrissie would choose not to wait in the cold. She fell silent and he sensed her hurt. Wait she did and not being one to stay quiet for long, was soon entertaining the lads with island gossip. Once the men tied the final knot, they submerged the boxes of lobsters into the sea to keep

them alive. With the ropes secured, they began the short walk home.

‘Come on, Jacky,’ said Jamsie. ‘Leave the lovers alone’.

Davie would have preferred to go with his brothers, but Chrissie demanded attention. She was a bonny lass with her round, fresh face and dimpled cheeks. Her corn-coloured hair fell loose across her shoulders, strands lifting in the wind. She walked beside him towards Scartongarth.

‘The box social’s on this night. I was scared ye wouldn’t get home in time.’ She slipped her arm through his and leaned against him. Her cloying touch filled him with a need to escape. These socials could be fun, but tonight Davie had no desire to bid for a box of baking and handcrafts in order to walk the supposedly anonymous owner home.

‘Chrissie,’ he began, but she held up her hand, stopping him.

‘Wait ‘til I tell ye about Tam.’ She laughed at some memory.

‘What?’

‘Ye know he’s that keen on Lizzy? Well, he tried to sneak into her loft to find out the colour of the ribbon on her box.’ She took a spasm of laughter, doubling over and clutching her stomach.

Her joviality was catching and in spite of himself, Davie laughed with her.

‘On Sunday and he’d just come from the Kirk.’

‘Ye mean he went up in yon loft in his best suit? The window’s missing. Must be full of bird’s shite.’

Chrissie sucked in a long breath. ‘He took the suit off. When he came down the lads had taken his clothes. He’d to walk home in his drawers and semmit.’

‘On the Sabbath?’

They laughed together. Why couldn’t it be like this – the pair of them being good friends and sharing a laugh? Why did she have to demand so much more?

She pressed her mouth against his ear and whispered. ‘I know we’re not supposed to tell, but my box has blue ribbons.’

‘I don’t think I’ll be going to the social.’

‘What?’ She stopped, jerked his arm and spun him around to face her.

‘It’s been a hell of a trip. I’m tired. I need to eat, wash and go straight to my bed.’

Disbelief replaced the laughter. ‘But . . . But I’ve been looking forward to this night for months.’ Guiltily he bent down to kiss her lips, finding them cold and slightly salty. ‘I’ll see ye in the morn,’ he said, disentangling the arms that went round his neck.

‘Davie, what *is* wrong?’

He hugged her gently. Hurting Chrissie was the last thing he wanted. ‘Why don’t *ye* go? Mind though, I wouldn’t want another lad to walk ye home.’ Without understanding why, he knew this to be true. He took her hands and placed them by her sides, kissed her cold cheek and went indoors. His brothers and father were already sitting at the table tucking into bowls of rabbit stew and potatoes.

‘I’m right glad to see ye,’ said his mother, Tyna, setting down another dish. ‘Where’s Chrissie, is she not coming in?’

‘I’m tired out the night Mam. I told her I’d meet her the morn.’

‘Don’t ye dare go making a fool of that lassie.’

‘I’ll not do that. She told me about Tam,’ he said, keen to change the topic.

‘That Tam. They say his drawers and semmit had never seen soap and water in months.’

Laughter filled the small kitchen. Tyna wiped her brow and turned her attention back to her youngest son. ‘But I’m worried about ye.’

‘Leave the lad be, Tyna,’ said his father, ‘No doubt they had a heavy night at old Abe’s.’ He winked at Davie.

‘Aye, that’s it.’ Davie began to eat his stew, grateful there would be no more questions. In truth, Jack, Jamsie and Abe had passed out with tiredness and a bellyful of whisky long before he went to sleep himself. He wrinkled his nose at the memory of the smells in Abe’s room, the peat fire, the steaming stockinged feet, the damp old dog and the whisky breath all mixed together with the odour of boiled cod.

‘Or maybe... he’s got an eye for a Kirkwall lassie,’ his brother Jack said.

‘When did we have time for the lassies?’ Davie snapped.

‘Ye’d better not,’ said his mother. ‘Yon Chrissie’s the one for ye, Davie. She’s a hard worker and she’ll make a fine wife.’

‘And she’s got fine broad hips to shelter ye from the wind when ye’re at the lambing.’ Jamsie mimicked his mother’s tone. He ducked, holding his hands up as she threatened him with the ladle. ‘Well, I hope ye’ve got plenty hot water on for a wash, Mam, because I’m not too tired for the dancing. What about ye Jack?’

‘Aye, it’ll be a good night. Who knows, maybe I’ll bid for Chrissie’s box. She makes a tasty bit of cake. Sure ye don’t want to come, Davie?’

‘Stop teasing the lad.’ His mother swatted him with a dishcloth. ‘Chrissie’ll not be going without Davie. It’s about time ye got a lass of your own.’

‘No lass would look at a sour bugger like Jack,’ muttered Davie.

‘At least I’m not like ye – still tied to mammy’s apron strings and scared to move unless big Chrissie tells ye.’

Davie made an effort to still the familiar knotting of his stomach. His brother’s touchiness and bouts of temper were growing worse. He glanced at his mother and noticed something in her eyes, something like distress or even fear. She slapped her hand on the table. ‘Will ye two stop yer carry on. Chrissie and Mary-Jane are both fine lassies.’

Jamsie had been courting Mary-Jane Rosie for over five years. At twenty-nine, he was the oldest son and heir to the croft and boat. When he married, his bride would come and live here and there was little enough room. Jamsie and Mary-Jane were waiting for one or both younger boys to move on. Jack had never had a steady girl, so his mother’s hopes centred on Davie and his lass, Chrissie, whom Tyna loved like a daughter.

Jamsie pushed Jack’s shoulder. ‘Aye, come on,’ he said. ‘Leave the lad be.’ Something about Jamsie would calm stormy waters,

so his granny used to say. He was the only one who got through to Jack these days.

Much later, his brothers gone and parents bedded, Davie stared at the wooden beams of his attic bedroom. He tried in vain to clear his mind of all thoughts so sleep would claim him. Eventually he gave up and went outside to where the thunder of the ocean filled the air.

The shoreline before him curved into a horseshoe shape. Shelved cliffs formed a natural harbour, inadequate for the fishermen's needs. In the distance lay the Skerries, ominous rocks in a river of moon-cast silver. On a calm night like this, the unearthly cries of the seals were extra loud as if they mourned for something beyond their reach.

He lowered himself onto the stone bench and looked past the slow sweep of the lighthouse beam towards the larger islands to the north. Davie thought of Isa Muirison. He had to see her again – but how? The next shipment of whisky went as far as St Margaret's Hope, a long sail from Kirkwall. Even if it were possible, what was the point in courting the lassie? He had nothing to offer her.

He always planned to join the navy or get a berth on a drifter and chase the herring where the real money lay. In his father's day, men found extra employment guiding large vessels round the islands, but since the building of the lighthouses, the pilots of the Pentland Firth were less in demand.

Davie pulled a mouth organ from his jacket pocket, banged it a few times on the palm of his hand, and raised the instrument to his lips. As he played a haunting melody, he closed his eyes and gave himself up to the music

Bess' sharp bark broke the spell. The long grass rustled and Chrissie materialised out of the darkness.

His family wanted him to marry this girl, thus inheriting the croft and boat she owned. She lived alone with her widowed grandmother. Yet even before meeting Isa, the reality of marrying Chrissie had filled him with a nameless dread.

Pushing the instrument back in his pocket, he glared at her. 'What are ye doing here?'

'I went to the dance, but I missed ye.' She slid onto the seat, pressing her body alongside his. Her breasts were warm and full against his arm. Her face tilted upwards, her lips inches from his. In the moonlight a tear quivered in the corner of one eye.

He wanted to tell her to go away – go back to her friends and leave him alone. But in spite of himself he felt the heat rise in his loins and he raised a shaking finger to touch the softness of her skin. How could he tell her he loved and desired her – but he yearned for something more?

He moved away, but she grabbed his hand, pressing it to her breast. 'I'll let ye – ye've tried often enough.' Reaching down she placed nervous fingers on his crotch.

'Chrissie.' Her name wrenched from him like a low groan. 'Please don't.' Why was she doing this now?

'Don't ye want me anymore?' She unlaced the front of her dress and allowed her full breasts to spring free. Her skin, milky and soft, held Davie's gaze.

'Want ye . . . ah . . .' His voice trailed to a stop. A heat filled him up.

'I will . . . if ye want.'

Groaning, Davie cupped a breast in his palm, finding it both softer and heavier than he had imagined. A shudder shot through him. He lowered his head seeking a nipple with his mouth. She jumped slightly and laced her fingers between his. 'Come to the barn.'

Something told him to stop but his body took on a mind of its own and he followed her. Together they fell on the straw, hands and mouths hungry.

When it was over, he rolled away and stared at the moonlight through the open barn door. Chrissie moulded herself against him, her bodice open, her skirts around her waist, her naked thigh across his. 'We'll have to marry now, won't we? I'm nineteen already, same age as my mother when she birthed me.'

He closed his eyes as ice water ran to his bowels. What had he done?