

## CHAPTER 3

# Women's Voices

**I**n the next two chapters you will hear the voices of some of the people we serve in Scotland's prisons. All are welcomed and no one is turned away. They bring their own histories, often of chaotic lifestyles as you will see, but they are the true stories of real people, the kind of people Prison Fellowship volunteers meet with each week.

In this chapter women will tell you about themselves in their own way and in their own words. They are still serving their sentences. Some aspects of their stories may shock or disturb you but you will also see that, despite their history and difficulties, they have found strength and real change as a result of their faith and the support they have received on their journeys of faith. Their identity has been protected by only using the first letter of their names.

**A.** ‘When I was remanded in custody for the first time, I was out of my comfort zone. I struggled to interact with other prisoners initially and found it hard to adapt to prison routine and life. One of the prisoners suggested I go along to Prison Fellowship, which is run by Prison Fellowship volunteers. I wasn't sure what to expect and whether I'd be welcome as I hadn't been to church in a long time and felt, after doing wrong, I wouldn't be welcome. Almost instantly I felt welcome and part of the group. I quickly realised that everyone sins and that when I was ready to ask for God's forgiveness I could. Over the last five months I have sought to do so. I now look forward to Prison Fellowship on Sunday morning, Sunday afternoon and Wednesday evening. Not

only do we get the chance to escape from the prison routine but leave feeling upbeat and hopeful that we are forgiven by God and we can continue to rebuild our lives.

I think the volunteers and the Bible studies we carry out have not only helped me through my sentence but have also allowed me to change my thinking and ask for forgiveness, which has allowed me to rebuild my relationships with my family and friends. Prison Fellowship for many has become an important part of our week. I also now have the confidence to study the Bible within my cell rather than pushing it to the back of my drawer – it has been a huge help.’

**L.** ‘I grew up with a loving supportive family yet for some reason I was an insecure nervous child. In my early teens I tried drink and drugs – mostly “party” drugs to begin with as they made me confident enough to join in and to talk to people. They made me feel how I thought other people felt. When I was seventeen-years-old, I got into a relationship with a much older man. He was abusive in every sense of the word and I fell pregnant. We finally parted ways when the last violent encounter caused me to go into labour and my daughter was born nine weeks and five days early, at only three pounds and twelve ounces. I moved back in with my mum. I was really depressed and attempted suicide. Thankfully my mum found me and got me to hospital in time. I got myself back on track, or at least I gave the illusion I was back on track.

I moved into my own flat and I ended up taking heroin and Valium. My life was a mess. When I was twenty-one, I had my youngest daughter. This was enough to cause me to rein in the drug abuse a little, as I was on methadone, but I still took amphetamine and was always trying to fill the void inside of me. Things then got worse again. During this time, I would have people in my flat drinking and taking drugs to all hours of the night. Finally, when my girls were three and six, they were taken into foster care. I then had no reason to even try and hold it together anymore.

The next ten years is just a bit of a blur due to drink, drugs and abusive relationships as well as the chaos. I felt so empty, so lost. It was so bad that I cut my wrists and would burn my arms with cigarettes.

I think in some way I thought that I deserved the beatings that I was getting. It wasn't so bad but it was a regular enough occurrence. Some instances were worse than others. Finally, in December 2010 I was in a flat with two of us drinking and taking drugs, when a man got beaten to death, which was, in hindsight, a certainty to happen sooner or later, given how comfortable and familiar the people around me were with violence and how often it occurred.

I was remanded for murder along with the other man. All alone, isolated in a cell with no drink or drugs and the firm belief that nothing on earth could help me, I had no option but to fall on my knees and say, "... Please God help me!"

During those ten years of carnage, I had often turned up at a mission supplying meals or an outreach bus offering a cup of tea and a chat. I had on occasions gone along to church with my mum's friend. The wonderful Christian folk I would meet at these places had something I didn't have, for they seemed to have a peace and a joy that I had never known and never thought I would know, and some of what they told me must have been held in my mind or heart somehow. That night in my prison cell was the first time I had ever truly prayed from my heart. I'd often prayed before but it was more like bargaining, saying, 'God you get me out of this, I won't do this again,' but on that night I was totally beat. I was totally willing to do things God's way. I started reading the Bible and going to church and praying on a daily basis. From that day to this day God has blessed me in so many wonderful ways. I am no longer in the clutches of addiction and I have gained many qualifications and skills. I have learnt to play the guitar and I enjoy playing in the church service and fellowship. I was allowed to speak at a conference at Edinburgh University, I attend gym five days a week and, at forty-three I am fitter and healthier than I was at twenty-one. I even got to mend some fences with my oldest daughter who was, because of my lack of ability to care for her, full of anger and resentment and who could blame her?

My daughter actually ended up in beside me in prison, although only for a short time, but it gave us a chance to spend time together and for her to see the person that I had become – although she struggled, I feel we did benefit from it. At the last Prison Fellowship group, before

she got out, she said she decided to say something and I did not know what she would say! She said, “last week we read about how Christians should be more Christ-like – patient, caring, loving, kind – well that’s just my mum.” I was filled with emotion and still am just remembering it. It was a wonderful moment. I’m so lucky that she allows me in her life. I only pray that I can get a chance to make it up to her when I’m released. Her sister was adopted by the foster carer but maybe one day, down the line she will be in touch.

I’ve been inside almost eleven years and I have another four years to go, but I know that God is using me to show others his goodness. I know I have the same joy and peace that I see in the Christian people. I had to come to prison for God to set me free and in June 2015, me and my friend were baptised- a full immersion – during the fellowship meeting, with the Governor, the SPS Chaplaincy Adviser, fellow prisoners all there – and my mum and sister and nieces were able to attend. It was such a wonderful evening.’

D. has written about her life with reference to some important milestones in her journey.

**D. ‘The beginning** – I always had the feeling there was something more to life, something bigger than myself, bigger than all mankind. I couldn’t explain what that something was but I knew that there was something waiting for me. I would find out much later. “You came into this world screaming and have never shut up since!” my mum laughed, smiling at me. “I was the first person to see you. We didn’t know what to expect,” my grandmother Janet adds. “It was Easter Friday and your granny always joked: ‘Don’t go into labour on a Friday as that’s the only night me and Eddie get to go out’” – my mum pulled a silly face to mimic my gran’s voice. “But you were too nosey, you couldn’t wait and the doctors warned us you may not survive. I mean you were born so early, twenty-six-weeks early. It was touch and go your poor mum was only fifteen as well.” Gran goes on to say: “You weighed the same as a bag of sugar, one pound eight ounces, the size of my hand” my mum’s eyes cloud over as she remembers it all. So here I was, “D” which is Hebrew and means “God has judged.” God was there in the beginning. As it says

in Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord plans to give you a hope and a future."

**Imagination** – "Abigail? Who are you talking to?" my father asks popping his head around the bedroom door. Daddy is tall with black hair and a shell suit rustles when he moves, "Can't you see her?" I say pointing to the ceiling light. This must be a game he is playing. Why can I see her sometimes? I stare at her so long the brightness of the light hurts my eyes; Abigail (my imaginary friend) is so beautiful! My dad scoops me up and holds me close, tumbling down my bed the covers billow around me as he tucks in the sheet around me. I like it when my daddy is home from work. My big cousin Chris told me that he wasn't at his work, but he was in prison, but I'm not listening to him because my daddy wouldn't tell me lies. Chris is only jealous because he doesn't have a guardian angel. Religion was never spoken about in our house. The family was divided, half Catholic, half Protestant. Being from the West of Scotland our mindset associated religion with football. I didn't understand how this fitted in with God. I mean I had never heard of Jesus popping up at a game of football!

**Age five** – My dad's away to work again and I can't wake up my mum. I pull a chair into the dark hallway to open the front door. It's dark outside and I walk to my nana's house because I'm hungry. 'You come and stay with us now until your mum's better', my aunt tells me. My stomach is turning over like a tumbleweed in the wind. My pulse quickens as I glance at the clock – tick-tock – the sound echoes in my head. It is nearly time. I bite my lip looking around the room. All around me people are shuffling, shoes scuffing, nervous twitches, the time seems to stand still as I glance at the clock once more. I take a deep breath and listen to the ticking impersonating my heartbeat, tick-tock, tick-tock. At last, the school bell rings. I leave my seat in excitement and shove the book I've been holding into my school rucksack. I leave the classroom and collect my coat from the peg. All around me are smiling faces, each of them happy to be going home. Not me, today I'm leaving, today my granny's picking me up and we're going to England.

**England** – The sound of the glass shattering makes me sit up in bed. I am fully aware, with a feeling of fear rising from my toes. My

sister Molly snuggles closer to me. I pull up the covers and tuck them under her chin, as angry voices rise from the party below. We hear an argument regarding furniture then World War 3 breaks loose. I tell Molly to stay with me and she and I pray silently. I tiptoe barefooted along the landing to the top of the stairs. Panic is starting to take hold as I hold my breath, scared, as the anger pours out below. Different voices shouting, trying to be heard. Someone's trying to calm the situation down, when the front door slams. Someone attempts to make a joke, "just have another drink" a voice screams out. My stepdad is not in the mood and I hear a bang as he strikes my mum. She begins to scream as he drags her by the hair into the kitchen. I stop dead still as I hear the second bang as he crunches her, hitting her face off a tiled floor.

**Age twelve** – I instantly feel better as the cap snaps and the fizzy bubbles of the cider fill my cup. Breakfast is served; the room is cold and smells of urine. I try to sleep as doors slam around me, different voices echoing down the corridor. I feel an itchy blanket as I try to get comfortable. It's another night in the cells. A few short years later a deadpan voice filled the courtroom, "you are a menace to society, a danger to yourself and others. I have no option but to sentence you to four years imprisonment. Take her down." I thought I knew it all. Full of bravado, a cocky smile and a swagger to cover up my insecurities. I felt I was hopeless, lost, alone, feeling unloved and unwanted. My daughter Molly was taken into care. My partner Kev was murdered whilst I was inside. God pulled me close and I started going to church. Eager to learn more, I began to read my Bible daily. Here I learnt of God's love for me: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16.

**Age twenty-three** – I am standing there on the tracks, the world begins to move in slow motion. I did not want to die but was so caught up in my own self-pity. So drunk I thought it would be ok. I should have walked 100 metres to walk over the bridge. "You will be fine" the Devil on my shoulder told me. Yeah, looks like it now. A train is heading straight for me. It freezes me to the spot. All I can smell is the oil and the sound of the screeching metal. I can't move, too late! I wait

to start drifting, to be taken away floating to Heaven. I open my eyes. I am shaking but alive. I pull myself from under the train. I feel numb. My arms and legs are all intact, but blood is dripping down my face. 'We need you to go to hospital,' a police officer says kindly as he guides me towards the waiting ambulance. When I feel alone, I thought I had no one. I thought that no one cared – but God was there to protect me – God is faithful. "You will not be tempted beyond what you can bear, but when you are tempted, he will provide a way out so you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). "So how did you get them stitches in your eye?" he asked. "I was hit by a train" I reply. "Pull the other one!" I pulled out the discharge papers from my bag. "There," I say pointing to it in black and white. "You've been lucky" Robert says as he stands to go to the toilet. Robert asked to see if I would be interested in a date. "Let me think about it."

**Age twenty-five** – "If you don't stop drinking, you will die!" the doctor says. "If you carry on you'll develop pancreatitis and the damage will be too far advanced. Morphine won't kill your pain." I have to go to rehab, mum's addiction worker states. I do not want the same fate.'

**One year later** – "I wish you could have been here to see her. She is gorgeous! I can't believe she is ours." I say. Robert and I gaze adoringly down at our newborn daughter.'

**Today** I am once again incarcerated but this time it is different, the difference is within me. A friend suggested I go to Prison Fellowship. When I first attended, I noticed there was a very different atmosphere. It was as if you could leave your mask behind, the mask you wore back in the hall. You could be yourself, everyone is warm and welcoming. I started going regularly and decided to be baptised. When I felt unloved and unwanted, God had carried me through the tough times and is always there to love, care for and protect me. With time my faith has grown, and I am always astonished that God is always there, ready to forgive no matter what, as long as we let him into our hearts and lives. I am slowly becoming more confident and have taken part in plays and singing in front of others. I am also doing studies with the university, even though I was recently diagnosed as having dyslexia. With God on my side, I believe I can achieve anything. The members of the Prison

## 40 YEARS BEHIND BARS

Fellowship are now my extended family and mean everything to me. I cannot imagine how my time would be without their support and encouragement. Yes, I sometimes get stick from other prisoners, but if only they would open their hearts to Jesus they too could feel at ease and have the support and guidance so they are not consumed by negativity and sin.’