

Copyright © 2022 by Clare Hawkins

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author. The only exception is by a reviewer, who may quote short excerpts in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Chapter 1 - October 1696

The supper was passed in silence. Only the shuffling of old Bessie's feet on the stone flags as she brought in each dish and cleared away, and the clink of eating irons on plates broke the stagnant air between father and son. For some time now, John had avoided attempts to initiate conversation. Requests were futile too. But this evening his desperation drove him to risk one.

‘Father, I would like to take a room in Edinburgh, to be nearer—’

‘I forbid it,’ his father said with cold certainty. ‘You will not live in that iniquitous den. Until you show some strength of character to stay on the path of virtue, I will not suffer you to choose your own course.’

Where once the Reverend Wyllie had used blows with fist or stick, now words sufficed to reduce John to shameful impotence. “Honour thy father and thy mother.” This and the other laws of God were scored into his mind and heart. There was no mother to be the recipient of his respect and honour nor any memory even, she having died at his birth. The beatings and reprimands of his childhood were punishment, he could only suppose, for deficits in his honour and respect towards his remaining parent.

The deepening furrow between his father's brows was the gauge of his disapproval. But with no means of supporting himself, John had no choice but to submit to his father's will, at least until such time as he was free of his studies. Now as his father warmed to the subject, John felt dismay at his own weak effort to state his case.

‘A city is a nest of temptation, particularly for the young such as you, of a weak, irresolute and susceptible nature. There are taverns and worse, which some weak-minded people treat as harmless entertainment. These are not places for the righteous. No godly, clean-living man goes to such places.’

‘It is not my wish to frequent taverns, I only —’

‘Enough,’ retorted his father. ‘I will hear no more of this.’ The Reverend Wyllie returned his gaze to his plate.

John could as well have debated with the toad that squatted by the pump in the yard, as he could with his father. There was no topic he could think of which would not invoke the criticism or ridicule of his father's tongue. Talk of John's studies would serve only to trigger a rant on the evils and dangers of reading heretical literature, which the university still allowed in spite of the complaints of the Kirk. Then his father would intone a list of approved writers and scholars from the ancients to the present day. John could not recall ever

seeing his father smile, nor betray a trace of humour or warmth, nor express any sign of joy at a happy event or piece of news. He would occasionally laugh, without mirth, at the expense of some sinner brought to account, to be shamed on the stool of repentance in church or at some devilry uncovered and punished by the Kirk Session.

So it seemed that the Reverend Wyllie had blighted any further chance of discussion, as was his usual practice, until to John's surprise, his father resumed in a less belligerent tone.

'I have collected, as you will know, the complete sermons of the great and pious Francis Farquhar of Arbroath. I've a mind to get them bound. Handling weakens and despoils them,' he said solemnly into his soup. 'I therefore charge you,' he continued, turning his frown on John, 'with the duty of approaching a bookbinder on my behalf when you're in the town. I find myself much engaged over these weeks. You must go to Master Carlyle in the Lawnmarket. He keeps a good, thrifty business I believe. Take the volumes there and engage his services. I will direct you as to my exact requirements.'

'Yes father, it will be done,' John replied, wondering whether this request was some kind of perverse test of his trustworthiness. His father guarded his collection of sacred texts and writings as though exposure to the eyes or hands of others would pollute them. Once as a child, John had dared to take one of his father's books from the shelf in his absence and had been sorely beaten for it. He hoped therefore, that he might accomplish this task without censure.

The next day, John and his fellow students broke free at the end of a grinding session on Geometry with Dr Arbuthnott. Their voices and laughter at their release rang in the chill air of the college courtyard and John found himself in the company of two who were walking his way, Mungo Craig, an arrogant, self-centred fellow and his more amiable cousin Allen Ferguson. Mungo was in a voluble mood, announcing his ambitions to become a leading force in the Kirk.

'I believe that I have the power,' Mungo declared, with a swoop of his voice as though he addressed a rapt crowd of the faithful before him, 'to make a mark, to pull back our countrymen from the edge of the abyss of sinfulness and decadence.'

'So, you think we're all bent on destruction?' said Allen Ferguson.

'Aye,' replied Mungo unequivocally, 'for don't you see it all about you? Consider the influences which are creeping in from England and from other quarters. We need ministers to instil godly discipline or all will descend into chaos. When such change leads to the destruction of values and the desecration of our true faith, bold men must take action.'

John wearied to hear this: the same rigid, unforgiving doctrines and absolute convictions voiced by his father.

‘God has called me,’ said Mungo, raising his face to the grey sky as though looking for confirmation from on high. The expectant silence was not filled for a moment until Allen Ferguson broke it.

‘And you’re not troubled at all, Mungo, by a voice from the other place?’ said Allen.

Mungo frowned at his cousin. ‘Mock, if you wish, as one who has not felt true piety,’ he said with a flourish of confidence.

‘Och Mungo, did I not hear you just the other day join your voice to the heresies of Thomas Aikenhead?’

‘Aikenhead the Atheist,’ said Mungo in a tone of disgust, ‘the fellow’s full of monstrous falsehoods.’

‘Aye well,’ said Allen, ‘but it’s a trial to know where next your favours will fall, Mungo.’

John could not avoid a fleeting moment of amusement at this puncturing of Mungo’s pride.

‘I take exception—,’ Mungo blustered, stopping and facing his cousin, his colour rising.

‘Be still,’ said Allen Ferguson, ‘I jest.’ He dodged past his cousin, strode ahead a few steps then turned to address John.

‘But you, Master Wyllie, tell us of your ambitions.’

‘I have little notion of what course I will take,’ answered John, ‘though my father would have me a minister. But I’ve a thought maybe of schoolmastering.’

‘You’re not serious, man,’ burst in Mungo Craig, irked by the shift of attention, his pointed nose twitching, ‘to spend all your waking hours in the company of brats. Schoolmastering, indeed!’

‘But, Mungo,’ said Allen with a smile, ‘Are not ministers of the Kirk to be charged with the task of setting up schools in every parish in the land? You may find it incumbent upon you to undertake the tutoring of young minds, if you choose the church as your calling.’

‘Never,’ said Mungo Craig.

‘Well, I think it noble,’ continued Allen Ferguson, ignoring his cousin, ‘And John has something about him makes people look up and take note.’

‘Well, it’s easy enough to impress the young and the ignorant,’ Mungo broke in, his lips twisting into a self-satisfied smile. ‘Aye, there are some men may be content with mere drudgery, Master Wyllie, and perhaps you are indeed such a one.’

‘Mungo, you’ve a mind to offend today, I can see,’ said Allen.

‘But I jest, man,’ said Mungo smirking, ‘just as you do. Pardon me, John, but there are some of us who aspire to higher ambitions.’

‘Aye,’ said John, feeling the prickling of his irritation at the man, ‘and there are those that place personal advancement above true faith in the word of God.’

‘Why Master Purity speaks,’ said Mungo, his sneer unconcealed.

Glad of an excuse to quit the company of Master Mungo Craig, John swiftly took his leave, striding along Chambers Street and descending the steep steps two at a time to the Cowgate. Dodging the rivulets of mud in the narrow St Monan’s Wynd, he came to the High Street, emerging near St Giles’s Church, only a short walk from the Lawnmarket. Here, somewhere amidst the shopfronts and stalls, he would find Master Carlyle the bookbinder’s establishment.

At the foot of the towering six storey building of Gladstone’s Land, by a curving outside stair, he found the shop, but it was boarded and shuttered with a note pinned to the door. “*And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain.* Closed due to a death.”

As he stood wondering how best he could undertake his father’s errand, a passing gentleman came to his aid. He was a portly, prosperous-looking individual wearing a smart coat, a tricorne hat and curled wig.

‘If you’re looking for another of the trade, I suggest that you make your way to David Fletcher’s of Candlemaker’s Row,’ he said, waving a silver-topped walking stick in the direction of the said street. ‘You’ll find no better craftsmen in the city in my estimation. He’s done a fine few books for me.’

‘I am much obliged to you, sir,’ John replied, pleased that a solution had presented itself with such ease.

The place was not half a mile’s walk, the curving slope of a street of four storey buildings, descending to the Grassmarket. He came upon a small shop front with a sign in gold lettering stating the name of the owner. There was a narrow window at about eye height, through which he peered. Inside was a neat workshop, with two wooden benches along each side. Two walls were covered with small wooden shelves on which were arranged the tools and materials of the bookbinder’s craft: reels of thread, small pots, sticks,

brushes and metal tools of various sizes. Two large wooden framed machines, one loaded with a block of paper, stood on one of the benches. In a basket on the floor lay a pile of leather skins and in another coloured papers of many different tints, blues, pinks and greens.

Someone was working at one of the benches and John noticed to his surprise that it was a woman, clad in a white cap and a black apron. Her head was bent over her work and he could see one hand extended, pointing a knife blade, while the other held a wooden implement of some sort with a straight edge. He stood watching for several minutes, fascinated by the concentration and steady hand of the woman as the knife travelled slowly and smoothly through a thick sheet of paper or board.

He could not shift his gaze from her and was loath to knock on the door lest he interrupt the delicacy of the operation, and destroy the tableau before him. So he watched as she finished the cut and saw her stand up, placing the tools carefully one by one before her on the bench. She stretched backwards and raised both of her arms in the air, extending them, like a cat stretching after rising from a slumber in the sun, then lowering them slowly to her sides. Two long strands of tawny hair dangled loose from her cap by her cheeks. With a sweep of her hand she pulled off the linen cap from her head, releasing a shining plaited rope of hair which swung at her back. She shook her head, as though enjoying the freedom from this restraint and as she turned, John saw her face. She was young with strikingly regular features, skin without a blemish and soft grey eyes. Suddenly, as though aware of his presence outside, she looked at the window and her gaze met his.

John withdrew his face from the window in a shock of embarrassment at his own impropriety in spying upon a woman alone. He thought for a moment that he should retreat down the street and disappear from the place. However, he knew that such action would surely lead to an awkward interrogation by his father at the failure of his commission. So he steeled himself for an encounter with the young woman and knocked tentatively on the door. She opened it a moment later. She was perhaps a little younger than his nineteen years, with an open and clear expression, eyes bright with curiosity and a mouth which spoke not of suspicion or blame but of warmth in her greeting. Her hair was neatly concealed again under her cap.

‘Pray, pardon me, Mistress,’ he stuttered, ‘for looking in at your window, for causing you offence, but I....,’ and he glanced again at her as she held him in her gaze.

‘Good day to you, sir,’ she replied in a quiet voice. ‘You have caused no offence. You have come on a matter of business?’

‘Yes, I have,’ he said, indicating the parcel he held in his hands. ‘It is a commission to bind these folios into a book, for my father.’

‘Come in, sir,’ she replied, ‘and place it here, if you please.’ Her voice was soft and her manner of speech seemed to John refined for a person of her station. She cleared a space on the bench.

‘My father will return at any moment, but if you would like me to see the work, I may be able to advise.’ She spoke with the confidence and assurance of one much older and practised in her craft.

‘Thank you kindly,’ replied John, placing the package on the bench and fumbling with the knots of the string.

‘Please, let me,’ she said, leaning over the parcel. He stepped aside, aware of his closeness to her slight figure as her fingers darted quickly to release the tension in the knots and fold back the wrapping paper.

‘The Sermons and Pieties of the Reverend Francis Farquhar,’ she read from the frontispiece. ‘This is a worthy project indeed.’

John sensed that her tone did not quite mirror the import of her words but he did not have a ready reply. He found himself instead in a state of near paralysis, having little or no experience of conversing with women, never having known his own mother and having no female relatives. His only exchanges with females were with their old servant, Bessie, and occasionally ladies at the kirk on a Sunday. There the demeanour of the dour parish women and their daughters, buttoned up in their black and grey, did not encourage any sort of social intercourse, beyond that of the exchange of devotional expressions fit for the Sabbath.

The young woman lifted her head from the pages and smiled at him, in a way that he had never before seen, with a brightness in her eyes and a delicate curve of her lips which revealed neat white teeth. Just as he thought he had lost the power to articulate any form of speech, the door of the shop was flung open and a tall, broad-shouldered man entered. He pulled off his bonnet to reveal rugged features and thin fair hair and nodded to the young woman. His gaze was friendly and direct as he addressed John, ‘Good day to you, sir,’ he said. ‘I see that my girl has started some business with you in my absence.’

‘Sir, Master Fletcher,’ he stammered, ‘my name is John Wyllie and I come on behalf of my father, the Reverend Archibald Wyllie of the Parish of Morningside.’

‘I am honoured to meet you, Master Wyllie,’ he said offering his hand, ‘and you have already met my daughter, Isobel.’

John glanced at the young woman again and she curtsied quickly to him as he inclined his head.

‘You’re surprised to find a woman at such work, I suppose,’ continued the bookbinder, ‘but she’s as gifted at this craft as any I know. Her mother has tried to persuade her to take up more homely pursuits, though.’

‘And you think embroidering handkerchiefs and doing plain sewing of more value than making books?’ said the girl with another smile towards John, which caused an uncomfortable rush of heat to his face. ‘What do you think, Master Wyllie?’ she said to him. ‘How do you think women should best be occupied?’

John could summon no reply, feeling the weight of her expectant scrutiny and the presence of her father, who to John’s relief, quickly intervened. ‘Isobel, will you offer Master Wyllie some refreshment, while we look at the work to be done.’

‘Would you take some soor-dook, Master Wyllie?’ she said and he watched her neat figure disappear through the doorway at the back of the shop to return a few moments later with three cups of buttermilk.

David Fletcher drew up a three-legged stool for John near the bench on which the Reverend Wyllie’s parcel of papers lay. His daughter, having placed the cups on the bench, took up a small notebook and came to stand by her father as he examined the leaves, measured and reckoned, calling out the figures which she noted in the book. The girl was so close that John could see the smooth curve of her cheek, the small ear lobe below her cap, the soft wisps of hair upon her neck, so close that he could have reached out and touched her face. He watched as her delicate wrist and agile hand moved over the paper with the pen.

‘May I ask after your place of residence, Master Wyllie, so that I can have a reckoning delivered to your father tomorrow? We have a boy who will bring it,’ said David Fletcher, turning to him.

John gave the details and took his leave from them as another customer entered the workshop. Out on the street, with his heart beating furiously, John chastised himself for his lack of foresight and guile in not offering to return himself the next day for the note of estimate. He realised suddenly and in a state of puzzled vexation, an overwhelming desire to see Isobel Fletcher again.

Chapter 2

‘I’ll take the reckoning myself, father,’ Isobel said when she realised that their message boy would not be arriving that morning. ‘Can you spare me for half a day?’

‘Aye, lassie,’ said David Fletcher, ‘a walk in the clear air would be fine. Go safely though and be sure to be back for supper.’

Isobel took the main thoroughfare south through Bristo Port and was soon in the open countryside beyond the city walls. The summer had been gloomy with rain and there was talk of the harvests failing again, but today there was a rare, blue brilliant sky. Leaving the main highway and the stream of carts and riders, she crossed the rough grassland dotted with gorse and whin towards the small village of Morningside, about three miles distant from the town, with the promised note for the Reverend Archibald Wyllie. She strode quickly along, warmed by the sun and her eagerness to reach her destination.

She was merely delivering a note and would not be likely to encounter the son, the serious, shy John Wyllie and yet she knew that she would welcome another meeting. She would hand the note in to a servant no doubt and be gone. But she could not rid her mind of thoughts of the comely young man who had surprised her at her work the day before. She smiled to herself at the recollection of his awkwardness in her company. He could not look her in the eye, but then as the son of a minister, bred to be modest no doubt, he might have thought it improper to speak to a woman alone. How shocked he might be to find her arriving at his house uninvited, unannounced. Yet she had felt his eyes upon her as she stood close to him and had seen his parting look. This had struck her profoundly and stayed with her all night and at the first moment of her waking that morning.

She wondered about the propriety of her own behaviour. Was she too forward and too immodest? Her mother had said as much on several occasions, worried perhaps that she would never get a husband, with her sharp tongue and forthright ways. But she had no desire for a husband at all and wished she could work for her bread in her own right, for she knew her skills were as good as any man’s. And if ever she were to marry, would she still be able to live her own life, she pondered.

She soon came within sight of a small clump of cottages at the side of the roadway which signalled the village of Morningside. The track was ridged by the passage of many cart wheels and pocked with the marks of horses’ hooves. On each side of the track sloped the cultivated rigs of cottars in neat rows and beyond stood the tower of the parish church. It would not be hard to find the minister’s house. Isobel already thought she had identified it as

the largest in the row which she approached. It was not likely that John Wyllie would be there, however, being occupied with his business whatever that might be.

The manse was a two storey stone house with a thatched roof and a walled yard to the rear. She sought out the back door which was reached through the yard, a shady square with uneven but clean-swept cobbles. Several doors led to a range of low slung outhouses, with one taller wooden clapboard building at the end, a stable or cowshed. She rapped hard on the back door of the house and waited, looking around. In the centre of the yard stood a pump with two wooden casks stacked one upon the other, a metal drinking cup on top and pail at the side. A black cat lay flat on the ground in one corner, the only patch of the yard, it seemed, which was penetrated by the sun.

An old woman opened the door and stepped out, a servant she guessed, with swollen feet and thin hair under her cap and an apron of hodden grey. She seemed bemused as Isobel explained her errand and handed her the note addressed to the Reverend Wyllie. She peered at Isobel through filmy eyes.

‘The Meenister’s no at home, lassie. He’s in the toon, but I’ll gie him the paper when he’s back. Will you tak a wee drink?’ she said, indicating the pump in the yard, ‘for it’s thirsty work all that walking, all the way from the city.’

‘Thank you kindly,’ Isobel replied going to the pump and taking up the pewter cup which she filled with water. It was cool and tasted sweeter than the water in the city, she thought.

‘I’ll get back tae my work, lassie,’ said the old woman half closing the door, ‘for the Meenister’ll be sair vexed if his supper’s late the night.’

Isobel thanked her again, bid her good day and headed back up the cart track the way she had come.

She had gone no further than twenty paces along the track, however, when she heard the sound of running feet behind her and turned to discover to her surprise that it was the young man, John Wyllie hurrying to catch up with her.

‘Mistress Fletcher,’ he called, his breath coming quickly with his exertions and a handsome flush on his cheeks.

‘Master Wyllie, good day,’ she said, hoping her friendly greeting would put him at ease.

‘Mistress Fletcher,’ he said again, ‘you have come yourself from Edinburgh, just to deliver the note?’

‘Aye, for the lad who takes our messages is not well today. Anyway, I love to walk out of the town. It’s a rare fine day for it, don’t you think?’

‘Yes, I agree,’ he said, ‘I like to walk too, each day to the University. I find it invigorating, even in winter.’

He paused, his dark eyes on her, a slight frown on his brow, seeming for a moment at a loss for words. He faltered in his request. ‘Mistress Fletcher, would you permit me to accompany you some of the way back, if it would not incommode you?’

She tried not to smile at his formality. ‘No indeed, Master Wyllie, I would be pleased for some company,’ she replied, with a note of enthusiasm she had not quite intended.

‘Thank you,’ he said, as they set off side by side on the road out of the village.

‘Tell me about your studies at the University,’ she said quickly, for fear of another awkward silence.

‘Well, they are all but over,’ he said. ‘I must seek my way in the world after this year. My father would have me spend three more years in the study of Divinity. But I find that I have not the liking nor the dedication for that.’

‘You surely need not follow his path, if it does not suit you,’ she said and then felt herself colour at this unsolicited offer of her opinion. ‘Pardon me, Master Wyllie, for speaking so boldly.’

He looked at her, more with puzzlement than affront. ‘No, you need not seek my pardon. You are right,’ he replied, looking down at the rough, pitted roadway where they walked.

‘But it must be a great delight to study at the University,’ resumed Isobel to repair the damage of her comment, ‘to be able to read learned works and converse, argue and debate with others about them. My brother Thomas talks of it often. He’s a student at the University too. Perhaps you know of him.’

‘I have few acquaintances,’ replied John Wyllie adding with a note of apology, ‘I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure of meeting your brother.’

Just as Isobel felt the weight of another silence descending between them, he looked at her again, and with more animation continued, ‘But you are interested in the exercise of the mind?’ he said with the usual note of surprise expressed by the few men, apart from her father and Thomas, to whom she had ever confessed this shameful secret.

‘You’re surprised at this in a woman?’ she said, ‘Do you think it wrong?’

She saw him blush deeply and again regretted her bluntness.

‘No, Mistress Fletcher, forgive me,’ he said. ‘I believe that everyone who has the capacity to learn to read should do so, for that is the way to the truth of the Scriptures. I think it admirable that you should wish to improve your mind.’

In his look Isobel was relieved to see none of the patronising piety of his words. In fact, he was gazing at her in expectation that she should continue.

‘Aye, there are so many great works of literature,’ she said, eager to pursue her chief interest, ‘as well as the Scriptures of course. There are all sorts of learned writings, verses and essays, mysteries and in foreign languages too. How I should love to read them. Thomas has taught me a little of Latin, but I know no Greek nor any French. Sometimes when I’m working on a book in the workshop, I find myself looking too much at the texts and reading so long that I fall behind.’

Isobel realised that she had indulged her excitement and that her rush of self-conceit might be tiresome to John Wyllie. He would surely not wish to proceed any further and endure more of her frivolous talk, for by now they had reached the open plain and the common pastureland with its network of paths converging on the main thoroughfare. There in the distance stood the black silhouette of the city against a sky now greying with gathering clouds. On a ribbon of road at some distance away, Isobel glimpsed a lone horseman cantering towards them.

‘Forgive me again, Master Wyllie’ she said, turning to him, ‘for my foolish chatter. I declare my wish to be learned and yet say nothing of any import.’

‘I don’t think you at all foolish,’ he said and his eyes were warm now, his voice soft, his embarrassment gone. ‘Tell me pray, what you would wish to read.’

‘If you will not speak of it to anyone, I’ll tell you. I would love to know French,’ Isobel confessed freely in a way which surprised her, as he was little more than a stranger to her. ‘For there are some wonderful works in that language, tales of chivalry and romance, such as the story of Lancelot by Chrétien de Troyes which I have only read in part, in English – But you would not approve, for you think I should read only the Scriptures. I think you must judge me harshly for my tastes.’

He coloured again and shook his head. ‘Please do not think I judge you. You speak of works I have never read.’ He paused and added, ‘But I do know some French and would gladly teach you.’

It was Isobel’s turn to blush. ‘Master Wyllie, that’s generous and kind.’ She found herself longing to accept and smiling, met his gaze.

‘I have books, a French reader, I will happily lend –’ he said, but looking up at the sound of hoof beats on the roadway, stopped abruptly. The horse and rider she had spied from the distance were now at about two hundred paces from where they stood. John Wyllie’s face blanched and he stepped away from her.

‘Who is it?’ she asked, suspecting some sort of danger, so odd and sudden was his reaction. She glanced at the horseman who was reining his beast to a walk.

‘It’s my father,’ he replied, his jaw tightening. The horse drew nearer and Isobel saw that the rider was a solid and powerful figure, a man of middle years with black eyes and a down-turned mouth. He stared first at his son then fixed his gaze upon Isobel. John took a step towards him.

‘Father, this is Mistress Fletcher. Her father is Master David Fletcher, the bookbinder. You will recall that I took the volumes of sermons to have them bound, as I told you, in the absence of Master Carlyle.’

The Reverend Wyllie said nothing in return and from his seat on the motionless horse, continued to stare at Isobel.

‘Mistress Fletcher delivered the reckoning to the house for you herself,’ added John, his voice as tense as the clenched fist at his side.

Isobel felt her colour rise with anger and discomfort at the older man’s incivility.

‘Mistress Fletcher,’ John continued in a toneless voice, glancing at her, ‘this is my father, the Reverend Wyllie.’

Still the man made no motion or sign to acknowledge Isobel’s presence or respond to his son’s words. She could endure this no longer, loathing the man’s stare and determined not to be cowed by it.

‘Sir,’ Isobel spoke up, ‘if you should find the estimate of costs to your liking, my father will be most happy to serve you. He will complete the work to order in the shortest time possible and to the highest standard of craftsmanship. There is no one better at his craft in Edinburgh.’

The Reverend Wyllie’s eyes darkened and he replied, his voice a hard sneer, ‘Young woman, I do not require you to speak on this matter, but will do business with your father, if at all.’

He jerked the reins and urged his horse forward without taking his leave, addressing instead his hapless son, who stood with his head bowed at the side of the track. ‘Come, sir.’

John cast a look close to despair at Isobel by way of farewell, then turned to follow his father’s horse back towards the village. Isobel stood astonished and appalled, hearing the

voice of the Reverend Wyllie declaiming loudly to his son and for her ears too, ‘You will consort no more with that woman.’

Isobel stood for a moment, feeling the sting of her fury at the man’s bullying rudeness. How could John Wyllie endure such a tyrant? Was there no course but submission to his will? She turned and walked swiftly away, irked by her feelings of pity and disappointment.

Chapter 3

‘Did you find Master Fletcher’s offer to your liking?’ said John that evening at supper. He would risk provoking his father’s wrath and haranguing tongue, for he was tormented by his desire to know whether the bookbinder’s services were to be engaged.

His father lowered his knife against his plate and looked up. ‘And of what interest is that to you?’ he replied.

‘I only wished to know if his price was fair,’ John replied without meeting his father’s eyes.

‘I see,’ said his father, his voice sour, ‘and if I wanted to send word to him on this commission you would be glad to take it, I presume? For you, no doubt, wish another encounter with that pretty young whore you met upon the road.’

John leapt to his feet. He would not sit and endure this talk of Isobel.

‘Excuse me, father. I’m not well,’ he said and made to leave the table.

‘Sit down,’ his father commanded. ‘I will not use the services of that man Fletcher. I know nothing of him, but a man who lets his daughter stray loosely about is not to be trusted. These are not people fit for association with us. I forbid you to visit that place again, nor to see that woman.’

John sat down again, knowing that there was little to gain from further disagreement. Compliance, he had found was the only strategy which allowed him to think at all clearly when castigated by his father’s commands and rebukes. He hoped that the worst of his father’s anger was burnt out and that meekness on John’s part would placate him, even make him forget that last threat. Though he now remained outwardly cowed, inside he discovered a new sensation, like a small and imperceptible shoot which grows green from a desiccated winter branch. He thought of Isobel, a woman, just a girl, a mere craftsman’s daughter who showed such independence of spirit to command her own life. If she had this power, surely then he too could take some command of his own?

John sat at the table, his supper finished, awaiting the moment when his father would release him from his company with a final prayer of thanksgiving as was his wont. This evening, however, the Reverend Wyllie drained the water from his cup, set it down deliberately on the table and stared at John.

‘We must seek guidance from the Lord, seek strength to repel those powers of the Devil that would inhabit our minds. You are weak and feeble of will. Pray for the strength to hold firm against temptation. On your knees.’

John left the table and knelt down on the stone flags in front of the empty hearth and bent his head to pray. His father had made John’s life a search for godliness. When he dwelt upon this fact, he felt the terror of the fate of the sinful. He had tried to live a life of righteousness and had adhered to God’s commandments, all save one. Was it for this failure that he seldom found comfort, nor a sense of peace and oneness with God, but more a kind of bleak acceptance of life as a barren and lonely state?

‘Lighten our darkness, O Lord.’ He heard his father’s voice above him and mouthed the words, though his mind refused to connect with the prayer, no matter how hard he struggled to force it. He thought only of Isobel Fletcher. He had never experienced such turbulence of mind, such unfamiliar feelings of compulsion, of desire to be close to a woman. He knew that it was the lust of his body which drove him, fired by her pretty face, her delicate mouth and her eyes which met his so directly. This was surely not all, however, for he and this lovely woman had conversed with what seemed to him an exchange of mutual warmth and understanding. But what did he know of women and the ways they enticed men to sin? Could a man seek his own pleasure and happiness and be truly righteous in the eyes of God? He wondered also if the Fletchers were godly folk and dreaded that they might be free thinkers or even worse, heretics. He dared not let himself consider this possibility.

At last, chilled and stiff, John rose from his knees and requested that he be excused, pleading the desire for solitary reading and contemplation. His father nodded grimly and went to the bookshelf from which he took a volume and turned the leaves.

‘You would be best advised to remind yourself of the wisdom of Knox and others on the inconstancy and instability of women. Listen here, “Womankind is rash and fool-hardy; and their covetousness is like the gulf of hell, that is insatiable.”’ He handed the book to John. ‘Read and be warned; cleanse your mind of all filth.’

Once behind his closed door, John snapped the book shut and tossed it on to an oak chest in the corner. Then he lay down on his bed, turned his face to the wall and closed his eyes, discovering the thoughts of Isobel teeming in his brain, his desire for her stronger than ever. This disturbing delight soon transformed itself into rational ideas of how he might contrive to see Isobel again, without his father’s knowledge and safe from his interference.

The next morning presented the perfect opportunity when, by luck, his father announced that he was to be gone from home for a day to visit another parish. John was

filled with delight that this chance had arrived so soon. He also had a legitimate reason to go again to the Fletchers' workshop, even though it was to relay the news that his father did not wish to engage the bookbinder's services. As soon as he heard his father's horse's hooves on the road, he made himself ready, completing his toilet with extra care, finding an old looking glass and combing his hair. He brushed his coat and put on clean linen. He took up his bag of books, into which he put a small French grammar and a reader, then set off on the road to Edinburgh, burning with the anticipation of being with Isobel again.

Though the wind blew hard against him all the way, he was hardly aware of the duration of the journey, so fixed were his thoughts on Isobel. He created her image in his mind, the freshness of her skin, the smile on her lips, her soft grey eyes and the rich brown of her hair. He imagined giving her the French grammar with his promise of schooling in the language as she had wished. He did not dare to conjure anything beyond this stage. Would her father object to his attentions or her brother Thomas, as some brothers were jealous protectors of their sisters?

On entering the town, he had already resolved to absent himself from a session by Dr Cunningham on Aristotle's dialectics and hoped that this would be explained by sickness rather than idleness, as he was by habit and reputation a dedicated scholar. He rapidly descended the steep road from the city wall to emerge at the end of Candlemaker's Row where David Fletcher's shop lay.

As he approached, he felt his anxiety return and it cost him some courage to knock on the door. He worried too that the bookbinder might be displeased at the loss of a hoped-for commission. There was a pause and he heard voices within. David Fletcher came to the door, wearing his work apron on which he wiped his hands. He greeted John cordially.

'Master Wyllie, good day to you. Will you step inside?'

'Thank you, Master Fletcher,' John replied, pausing before divulging the news of his father's decision. 'I... he... deeply regrets any inconvenience caused...your time and labour.... and Mistress Fletcher's wasted journey, I...'

'Master Wyllie, don't concern yourself,' said David Fletcher with a casual reasonableness which John found wholly unfamiliar. 'It's common enough. I've been in this business for many years. People buy as they please and as they see fit. We're their servants. That's the way of business and the world. Think no more of it.'

'I thank you for your kind understanding,' said John from his heart. There was a pause during which David Fletcher returned to his bench and picked up a stack of papers. 'Is there something else I can help you with?' he said.

‘Master Fletcher, I wonder if your daughter...’

The man’s face softened into a smile. ‘Aye,’ he said, ‘I should have realised. I’m sure that she’d be pleased to see you, but she’s not here. She’s gone this morning on some errands, to the market, the Fleshmarket, I believe. Would you care to be seated and await her?’

John felt too restless to take up this offer and enquired if he might return at a later time.

‘Aye, by all means, come back when you please. You’ll certainly find her here in a wee while,’ he said.

John thanked him and took his leave, resolving to go in the direction of the Fleshmarket, on the chance of meeting Isobel, though in the crowds he thought it unlikely. He passed the dismal sight of the Tolbooth prison and in the stocks a gaunt desperate man, hanging limply in his sackcloth of punishment. What crime had he committed John wondered, theft, fornication or even the breaking of the Sabbath? He had seen women here too, disgraced as scolds or accused of adultery. Dire warnings were these for passersby of the consequences of the sins of the flesh. He felt himself shiver with guilty thoughts, that his desire for Isobel was driven purely by his fleshly craving for her body, and that her loveliness was a wicked temptation which he must resist. This was his father’s belief. She was forward and bold in her way, he had to admit, but there was at the same time a sincerity and honesty in her manner, which was surely not lewdness. Some preachers he had heard declared that the love between man and woman was divinely inspired, a reflection of the love of God for man.

He drew near to the Tron Kirk and by the narrow Niddry’s Wynd found himself at the entrance to the Fleshmarket, a partly roofed quadrangle abuzz with activity, packed with hawkers, shoppers, stalls and carts. He joined the throng as they pushed in between the wooden stalls. The press of people set one lurching, swinging a row of dead fowls hanging by their necks into a rhythmical dance. Ripening meat, bloodied or brown, on slabs and platters or hanging on hooks, seasoned the air with a metallic stench. The cobbles were shiny with blood and under a wooden hand-cart two thin dogs licked up slivers of guts, until a rough shout and a boot on their rumps sent them off yelping. He would never find Isobel in all this, he thought, pushing on and scanning the multitude of heads of women, white caps, plaids, shawls. He would know her again in an instant, for the picture of her was alive in his mind as he searched the crowd with growing desperation.

He reached the edge of the market where most of the stalls ended and the crowds of shoppers had thinned and then to his delight, he saw her. She was standing at a stall selling salted meat and was talking to the vendor. She wore her white cap, her hair tucked away from her face and her plaid of red and green wrapped around her with one end draped over her shoulder. She took her purchases from the man and bid him goodbye, then turned away from the stall and headed off, weaving back across the square.

At that moment he cared for nothing but to be beside her and pushed his way as quickly as he could through the crowd, for fear she might disappear. Like a starving man, driven mad by hunger, who sees a crust of bread within his reach, he made after her and saw her turn into the narrow alleyway of Martin's Wynd.

He was running now, dodging past people and raising some stares, almost slipping on the slime of the cobbles in his haste, but soon he was at the end of the alley down which she was retreating. Would she take fright if he suddenly called to her or approached her from behind, he wondered, but thought how furtive it would be to follow her in silence.

'Mistress Fletcher,' he called, hoping that his voice would carry. She turned and stopped.

'Good day, Master Wyllie,' she said and her smile made his heart race. But he was determined not to play the tongue-tied fool of their previous encounters.

'I'm glad to find you,' he blurted, approaching her. 'I called at the workshop. Your father told me where you had gone.'

Her eyes were upon him but she said nothing. 'Mistress Fletcher, I come to apologise for the manner of our parting when we were on the road,' and here he felt the embarrassment of this moment return. He knew what he wished to say about his father's conduct, but was unable to utter words of disrespect. 'My father was surprised to see us and was taken aback, when he met you. I deeply regret any offence....'

She smiled again. 'It is no matter. It was perhaps foolish of me to do an errand fit for a messenger boy. Your father must have thought it unbecoming.'

'Mistress Fletcher, you are generous in your judgments of others.' The idea that Isobel Fletcher could be judged unbecoming by anyone, even his father, struck John as outrageous. She looked down for a moment and he thought that he saw a small blush rise to her cheek.

Emboldened, he risked stating the second part of his quest. 'I also wanted you to have this,' he said, pulling out the French grammar from his bag. She took it gently in her hands.

'Master Wyllie, this is so kind.' She turned a smiling face to him.

‘And my offer still stands, to teach you French,’ he continued, feeling the pounding of his heart, ‘if that is your wish and if your father would permit it, of course. I come most days to the city, to read in the library or for sessions at the college. If you could find some time free’

He found himself walking by her side again, in a state of happiness beyond anything he could imagine. She had some errands still to do and, to his delight, she let him accompany her back along the High Street, though the press of people, animals and vehicles fractured their talk, until they drew near to Candlemaker’s Row. Here she suggested they take a path through Grey Friars Kirkyard for the greater quiet it would afford them. Relishing this chance to prolong their time together, John wondered fondly whether this too was her intent. They entered by the arched gateway into the graveyard, where grassy mounds and grey stones marked the many resting places of the dead. Passing the squat, stone church, they took a path under the shade of some elms, their pace slowing in the quiet seclusion.

‘Though it’s a place that has seen much sadness and suffering, I find it calm and peaceful,’ said Isobel, looking round. ‘It was a garden long ago, a place for contemplation.’

‘Aye,’ he said, gazing at her, ‘are you much given to contemplation?’ supposing that she sought spiritual comfort within these grounds where the Covenanters had stood firm for their faith and suffered for it.’

‘Oh no,’ she said with a smile, ‘my mind is too much given to waywardness, not disciplined by scholarship and scripture like yours.’ He sensed a note of gentle teasing but when his eyes met hers there was a candour in her look, not of mockery but, though he could not quite believe it, admiration.

Greedy with desire to know more of her, he begged that she tell him about her craft. She spoke with joy and pride about the stages of taking a book from its bare, loose pages to a complete volume, bound and finished as a work of art. He was amazed at how vast was her knowledge for one so young and how her vibrancy, her vitality, so strange and wonderful to him, flowed through her talk.

They reached the far wall which marked the boundary of the Kirkyard, though John had been scarcely aware of the distance they had covered. She too, absorbed, eyes bright with attentiveness, also seemed careless of the passage of time, happy for them to sit down together upon a stone bench by the wall. She questioned him about what he had read of the ancient poets, his favourite tales from Homer and Virgil. She told him too of her own reading tastes.

‘I find myself drawn by works of poetry in Scots and in English too,’ she said. ‘Do you know any verses by Drummond or Hawthornden?’

‘No, I have not read such things, Mistress Fletcher,’ he confessed and was shocked at his own reaction that she should enjoy what his father called works of profanity. That she should read with such ardour and be so fearless in her choice of material perplexed him, though he was drawn strongly, enticed by her talk of such things.

‘And I love the old ballads too,’ she continued, seeming to disregard his ignorance. ‘I know that they talk of old ways, tales of past and pagan times, bravery and blood.’ She broke off suddenly and blushed.

‘Forgive me, Master Wyllie, I forget myself. You must think me a silly creature, filling my head with nonsense.’

‘No,’ he protested, ‘you speak of things of which I have no notion, but would dearly wish to know more. My life has been muchconfined....’, and he found himself unable to continue, in case he confessed too much and she would discover the narrow bleakness of his life until now.

She looked at him earnestly. ‘Please call me Isobel, if you wish, that is if you will permit me to call you John.’

He was overwhelmed that she should speak to him like this, that she should wish to be acquainted with him and offer this degree of intimacy. But his joy was mixed with anguish. He felt the heat come to his face when she rose from the bench, saying that she must return home. He stood up, wondering how he could take his leave of her, so choked as he was with disappointment. But she transformed his anxiety to delight again.

‘Come, we are near to our house,’ she said. ‘Would you care to step in and take some refreshment? I know that my father and mother would be pleased to see you. Thomas would wish to meet you too but he will likely be at the University today. He’s always at his books. I wonder that you have not met him.’

‘I would very much like to make his acquaintance,’ John said with genuine feeling.

‘I’ll ask him to seek you out,’ she said brightly as they approached the door of the shop.

The Fletchers lived in apartments directly above their shop. Stone stairs at the side of the building gave access to the different storeys. Their rooms were on the first floor and Isobel led John into a snug kitchen, warmed by a fire, where a handsome, fine-boned woman sat sewing at a plain table. She rose as they entered with a look of friendly curiosity at John.

‘Mother,’ said Isobel, ‘this is Master Wyllie. He is a student at the University, though he is not acquainted with Thomas, at least not yet.

‘You are right welcome, Master Wyllie,’ she said with a smile.

John bowed. ‘Thank you, Mistress. You are kind,’ he said feeling his colour rise under the woman’s gaze.

‘Isobel, take your guest into the parlour, for there’s a fire made up in there too,’ said Mistress Fletcher. ‘Will you take a cup of ale, Master Wyllie?’

Isobel took him into the small dark room, furnished with an oak chest, some chairs and a dresser with shelves containing a number of books. She lit two candles upon the mantelshelf and John watched as the yellow glow illumined her neat profile, thinking that this was the warmest most comforting place he had ever been. For the brief moments of Isobel’s absorption in her task, John could not unfix his eyes from her. Her waist was slender, the curve of her breasts made smooth contours which he would have delighted to trace with his hand. He longed to stand close to her again. The door opened to admit David Fletcher, who nodded at John.

‘You found her then, I see,’ he said with a smile, taking up a clay pipe from the fireside.

John passed a pleasant hour in the company of the Fletchers, whose manners he found easy, their hospitality generous.

‘So you return each day to Morningside, Master Wyllie?’ said the bookbinder, knocking the ash from his pipe on the hearth. ‘The walk must be hard on your shoe leather.’

‘Aye,’ said John, ‘but it is bracing for the body for I spend too many hours bent over my books.’

‘Aye, true, that’s the fate of a scholar,’ he laughed.

‘Have you brothers and sisters at home, Master Wyllie?’ asked the bookbinder’s wife.

‘No, Mistress, I have none. It is only my father and myself,’ said John, hoping that the kindly and curious people would probe no further into his family circumstances. Isobel came swiftly to his aid with a change of subject.

‘I’ve just finished binding an interesting work, an historical one, a life of poor Queen Mary. I’ve been reading a little of her sad exile in England.’

‘Aye,’ said Jean Fletcher, ‘is it true that she was parted from her bairn at his birth and never saw him again? What a miserable thing.’

‘What’s this wife? Pity for a papist queen?’ said David Fletcher with a mischievous wink at Isobel. ‘You mean that papists have the same feelings as we do?’

Jean Fletcher tutted and shook her head good-humouredly at her husband. John had never been in a household such as this, where people's thoughts and opinions were openly voiced, even welcomed, not strangled by pieties. They exchanged talk with him as with one known to them all of their lives. Then Isobel rose and went to the dresser, returning a moment later with a small leather-bound volume.

'I've a mind to educate you too, John, if you're to teach me French,' she said with a smile.

'Isobel, what are you doing, leading this serious young scholar astray?' said Jean Fletcher in mock disapproval.

'Tis only a book of some of my favourite verse,' she replied. 'John has read only the poetry of the ancients, and nothing in Scots or English.'

'I suppose there's no harm in it,' said her mother, 'though, I'm no great reader myself, I must confess, so what would I know?'

'Well, I think that while we have our wits we should read all of the fruits of men's minds, to better judge those of value and worth. Would you not agree?' said Isobel.

John had no ready answer to such a challenge which in his father's house would have led to a whipping.

At the door to their apartment, as Isobel showed him out, John longed for words fitting to their parting. He paused at the top of the stairs, looking at Isobel framed in the doorway.

'Mistress – Isobel, I thank you –.'

'John,' she said taking a step closer to him, 'I have enjoyed our time today, but we meet on the next occasion for more serious business, do we not?'

'Aye, of course,' he faltered, feeling the heat rise to his face, 'but there may be joy in serious study too, do you not think?'

'Yes, I do,' she replied with a smile.

He hardly noticed the physical reality of his journey home, so busy and besotted were his thoughts of Isobel. He carried Isobel's book inside his coat, close to his chest and thought with delight of their next meeting arranged for the following week, to start on the study of the French language. How could he pass the time until then? He did not wish to return home straight away and stopped instead and sat on a boulder at the side of the path. He took out the small book. It had a plain, soft, brown leather cover with delicate gold-tooled flower motifs on the front and marbled paper-lined boards inside. On the back was a tiny gold symbol

which he deciphered as Isobel's own initials. He turned it over in his hands and held it to his lips before opening it and reading.

In Isobel's own neat hand were many poems, some by known authors in old Scots and some anonymous ballads. They treated, as she had said, themes of love and war, death and bravery, spoken by forlorn lovers or by those swearing constancy in life and death. He devoured them one by one, mouthing the words in a whisper. Then he came to the last, an ancient ballad spoken by a lover to the object of his affection.

*An thou were my ain thing
I would love thee, I would love thee.....*

As he read it again, he realised what had happened to him. How could the words of a simple poet express the passion and the yearning that he felt?

*My passion, stronger than the sun,
Flames stronger still, will ne'er have done
Till fates my thread of life have spun,
Which, breathing out, I'll love thee.*

Now it came to him, suddenly, the course he must take. His studies were nearly completed and he would soon gain his degree. He need wait no longer to start seeking a post as a schoolmaster in the city, or anywhere else nearby, so long as it was out of his father's sight, out of his grasp. He would speak to David Fletcher and make himself a worthy wooer for Isobel. His mind was alive with the excitement and danger of these possibilities as he resumed his journey home.