

Chapter 13

March 1697

‘Well, John,’ said the Reverend Wallace, ‘I must say, though I know you’re too modest to admit it, you’ve made an excellent start. You’ll make scholars of these bairns yet, even little peasants such as these.’

The old minister shook his head with a sigh of admiration. ‘The child, Willie Jamieson, I’ve never seen anything like it in all my life,’ he continued. ‘Who would have thought it?’

Before them on the table of the parlour in the manse, lay a few sheets of paper bearing the children’s writings, verses from the Scriptures, and beside these a dozen or more sharp, detailed drawings in pen and ink.

‘Here, will you have a wee dram,’ said the minister, ‘while we look at these again?’

‘I thank you, but no,’ replied John. ‘I’ve a weak stomach for drink, I confess.’

‘Oh dear, ‘tis a pity,’ said Reverend Wallace, ‘but you’ll not mind if I take a drop myself, to keep out the cold.’

John smiled to himself, hearing the murmur of pleasure from his companion and watching his quivering hand pour a generous measure of whisky.

‘Well, well, Willie Jamieson, that poor wee laddie that some would call weak-brained and others bewitched. What a revelation is here,’ said the Reverend Wallace, picking up one to the drawings and chuckling with the pleasure of amazement, which John could not help but share.

The old minister examined each drawing carefully. Here was an exact replica in ink of the parish church, its every stone marked in intricate detail, the shadows of light falling on the tower, the perspective perfectly realised, a work of meticulous vision, a vision inside this child’s head, charged it seemed by only one look at the object itself. Another one depicted the Castle of the Foulis family, from a distance, standing high over the valley of the Water of Leith, with the froth of the foliage of the trees created by delicate strokes of the pen. Yet others were of his parents’ cottage and then a series from school, the first a portrait of John himself and then of groups of children in the class, then Mary, his mother and father and another of two cows and some goats in the outfield.

‘John, I’m truly amazed. What work you have done with these children,’ said the Reverend Wallace again, looking up at him with his watery blue eyes.

‘I can take no credit for the child’s gift,’ John said. ‘For those believers in miracles, this child’s talent would surely be one.’

‘Aye,’ said the minister, ‘it is hard to believe, but we have the testimony of our own eyes. Come, let’s sit for a while, for my old legs pain me to stand.’

John brought a chair for the minister and placed it near the table.

‘Bless you, John,’ he said. ‘I’ve a mind we should do something for the bairn with such a talent as this, for I cannot see him earning a living on the land.’

‘No, I agree. Willie’s mind is singular and not subject to instruction and constraint,’ said John. ‘But would these drawings not be fit to sell?’

‘That’s it,’ said the old minister suddenly. ‘These works are splendid by anyone’s measure. You must take these drawings to Edinburgh, John, with the parents’ agreement, of course. Do you know of any who would trade in such things? The sale of these could be of great help to his poor family, if they would be prepared to sell them, of course.’

‘Aye,’ said John thinking of the booksellers and stationers he knew in the city. ‘Aye, I know of some who might deal in such work.’

The Reverend Wallace’s suggestion made John’s heart leap, partly at the prospect of this wider recognition of the child’s extraordinary ability, but also, he realised, at the chance of going to Edinburgh, for Isobel was there. Even as he knew it was folly to seek her out, he had failed utterly in his struggle to rid himself of thoughts and of longings for her. Each day he prayed to God to give him the strength to forget her, but the memory of her, the power of his longing for her simply obliterated any devotions he could summon with prayer. He had tried to keep hidden her book of verse at the bottom of a chest in his room, so that he might not be tempted to look at it. But he would too frequently retrieve it, finger the pages, kiss the cover which she had made with her own hands, close his eyes to hear her voice again speaking the lines of her favourite verses. In doing this he discovered, to his consternation, that his passion for her had not dimmed at all but had grown stronger than ever. He knew he could never find peace until he had at least endeavoured to speak to her again.

He determined, therefore, to pursue this proposal at the earliest opportunity. After school one day, he accompanied the Jamieson children to their cottage. This was his first visit to their home and Mary seemed ill at ease when John had told her of his planned visit. She was silent on their walk, tethering with a firm grip a bounding Willie who seemed intent on escape, emitting grunts of protest or perhaps of pleasure. The Jamieson’s dwelling, in

common with others in the village, was a mean, roughly- built stone cottage with a roof of turf. A thin trail of smoke emerged from the top as there was no chimney. Though his own little chamber in the schoolhouse was modest enough, it was luxurious compared to this poor place. The cottage was a low-slung structure, with two small slit-like windows and a door of woven willow rods.

Mary went ahead and pushing open the door, steered Willie inside.

‘Please will ye come in, sir,’ said Mary shyly. ‘Ma, it’s Maister Wyllie wants a word.’

Inside it was dark and the air was thickened with smoke from the fire. There was little furniture save for a few wooden stools, a small rag rug, a slatted chair, a wooden cot bed in the corner, a meal kist and two shelves upon which the kitchen utensils were housed. The children’s mother had risen from her chair by the fire, setting aside some knitting, at the announcement of John’s arrival.

‘Maister,’ said Mistress Jamieson, pale with fatigue and heavy with child, though her welcome was sincere. ‘I’m right glad to see ye. Please tak’a seat by the fire. My man’s in the fields yonder. I’ll get Mary to go for him, if you hae need o’ him.’

‘Thank you, Mistress Jamieson,’ John replied, ‘I would not wish to disturb him at his work, but I have a proposal which I think he should hear.’

So Mary was sent for her father while her mother gave John a pot of watery ale.

‘Maister, I dinnae ken what you do in your school, but Mary is full o’ it and the bairn willnae cease from writing and drawing all the day,’ said Mary’s mother. John saw in the thin pallor of her face that she must once have been a comely woman and had a glimpse for a moment of how Mary might be one day. The hope rose in him that Mary’s cleverness might lead her to a better lot in life, an escape from this draining poverty. The thought too that Willie might be the means of their more immediate relief also cheered him.

‘I hope they’re not kept from their work, Mistress Jamieson,’ said John.

‘No, Mary’s a good lassie. I thank ye from my heart that ye should school the likes o’ them.’

‘There is no need, Mistress, for it is my duty to the children and to the Kirk. I must tell you too that your children are in their different ways prodigious in their talents. You should be most proud of them both.’

She smiled with pleasure at John’s words and looked over at Willie who sat in his corner, humming to himself and drawing shapes in the dust of the floor with a stick.

‘Aye, it has quieted him, the schooling,’ said Mistress Jamieson.

‘And his work, his drawings and sketches are truly remarkable in one so young,’ said John.

‘Aye,’ she sighed, ‘but there’s some that say it’s the De’il’s work, witchcraft working in the boy.’

‘Mistress, that is merely foolish superstition,’ said John, outraged at the words of the ignorant. ‘Willie’s gift comes from God. It’s true, he is not as others are, but God has given him this great talent, which he cannot help but show in this way. Willie cannot praise God with his voice, but he can with his pen.’

The woman gazed back at John for a moment without a word.

A little later Alexander Jamieson entered. A strong wiry man, his clothes spattered with mud from the rig, he pulled off his bonnet and nodded a welcome to John. Mary came in after him and crouched down by her mother. After John had told of the proposal to sell Willie’s drawings, the cottar gave no immediate answer, as though he believed the thing to be a trick or a falsehood. He lit his clay pipe and looked at John.

‘Do ye think that folks would buy such things, Maister?’ he said shaking his head. ‘Can it be that town folks would tak’ a fancy to these things o’ Willie’s?’

‘I’m certain, Master Jamieson, that they would be of great interest in the city. I would be happy to act on your behalf by seeking out a buyer. That’s if you would wish to part with them, and if Willie would agree.’

Alexander Jamieson laughed with a tinge of bitterness. ‘If ye can get any sense frae the lad, then that would be worth the hearing.’ He paused and looked over at Willie who had by now scratched many lines of writing on the floor. ‘Ye ken we had three other sons, but they were taken frae us. Willie’s our cross to bear.’

‘Alec, the Maister has nae wish to hear o’ that,’ said Mistress Jamieson, rising and pouring some ale into a cup for her husband. ‘Thank ye, Maister, for yer kindness and trouble. If ye sell them, we’d be in yer debt.’

‘Not at all, Mistress, I am most happy to oblige and I have to go to the city myself on other business,’ replied John.

So it was agreed that John would go to Edinburgh to investigate opportunities for the sale of any or all of Willie’s drawings. The child himself seemed indifferent to his output, showing no interest in his pieces once they were finished. So prolific was he that he could, without much effort it seemed, produce more before even these were sold. John bid goodbye to the family and determined to start early the next day.

He could not sleep, however, plagued as he was with anxieties about his plan to see Isobel. He tossed restlessly throughout the long night, first deciding to banish the very idea of such a mission, so vivid was his remembrance of her last words to him. The passion of her hatred and disapproval made him quake as he recalled it. Half dreams and visions haunted him too of Thomas's body hanging, of his face smiling and his last words offering friendship on that terrible evening at Cleriheugh's Tavern when he was taken. John thought too of the futile letter he had penned to the Lord Advocate himself, pleading for Thomas's life, arguing the sincerity of his struggles with his conscience and his own conviction of Thomas's penitence and virtue. But like all the pleas from men more prominent and eloquent by far than he, it had failed. And yet, in spite of all this, he could not, would not, relinquish all hope of Isobel.

After several hours, he rose in a cold sweat tormented by these visions and doubts. Lighting a candle, he paced the room, wondering how he could make the best approach to her. He took up pen and ink to write her a letter, thinking that this might be preferable to her than having to face him again in person. But what could he say to her, that he was sorry that Thomas was dead and hoped that she would forgive him his part in it? It was insulting, weak and shallow. He took up her book of poems and read a few of his favourite ones. Perhaps he could write her a poem, though he doubted that he could express adequately the depth of his feelings for her, nor the way she had changed his life. The delight of her had introduced to him an agony of pleasure with its counterpart of pain when they were forced apart.

He sat down with pen and ink and scribbled some lines, 'When first I saw your face..... Love was unknown to me.....Isobel, your name means love to me.....' His candle sputtered and went out. In the darkness, he groped for another and sparked it to light, his fingers numb with cold. Shivering he put on his coat, wound his cloak around him, tore up the paper and reached for another. His pen scraped on as he struck out lines, wrestling with words which would truly speak of what passion she had awakened in him. 'This gloomy chamber housed my frigid heart....you came to bring warmth and delight...like the gold flame of a candle.' Several hours later, his fingers icy cold he laid down his pen, folded the paper and fell exhausted on to the bed.

To Isobel

*In tenebrous cell, inhabited by fears
creeping like spreading moss on dampened stone,
a place bereft of feeling, where alone
in search of God, with secret, silent tears*

*I dwelt and laboured in my sin to find
some path to righteousness and purity.
But in this doubt-infested gloom, to see
or sense a gleam of life of any kind
could never be, until that wondrous day
when you, who like a golden candle flame
discreetly lending warmth and shedding light
shone on my frigid soul, melted the clay
of my dead heart. And close to you I came
to feel your radiance set my love alight.*

He woke after a few hours of oblivion, glad that at last, with the coming of day, it was time to depart. Opening the door of the schoolhouse, he saw at a short distance Susan approaching, carrying a basket. The kindly servant woman came regularly and took his linen and shirts for laundering. They came back immaculately folded and pressed. She showed the same dedication to the cleaning of the schoolhouse and his rooms and would sometimes bring pies and other foodstuffs for him.

‘Good day, Susan,’ he said and her strange ugly face lit up with a smile.

‘Mornin’, sir,’ she replied, ‘Got yer linen ‘ere, sir.’ John thanked her for her work and reached in his pocket for some coins, though as usual she seemed reluctant to take anything for her pains.

‘Off to the city today is yer, sir?’ she enquired in her southern speech which he had grown quite used to, as he had to her marked, livid face.

‘Yes, I am indeed,’ and he told her about the venture with Willie’s drawings.

‘And I wishes you well, sir, in such business,’ she said, ‘for that child’s a little treasure.’

She had shown a particular attachment to the boy and he to her, in so far as he did to anyone. John was moved also by her affection for the children and her affinity with them. It was this devotion to his pupils he supposed which drew her so often to the schoolhouse.

John bid her good day and as she went into the schoolhouse he took the track in the direction of the town. He strode out briskly, impatient to reach the city, to dispel the doubts still festering in his mind. Could there really be any hope of some measure of reconciliation with Isobel, he wondered. He remembered how brightly her eyes had lighted upon him, how tenderly she had responded in those shared moments in the Fletcher’s parlour. Perhaps her

last words to him had been charged with the pain of her anguish about Thomas, rather than a final and awful declaration of her loathing. But he recalled the pious, self-righteous preaching tone he had used to her and shuddered with shame and embarrassment at the recollection.

Would she believe him if he told her of his desperate sorrow at Thomas's death and his unwilling role in it? Would she believe him when he told her of his struggle to escape the strangling power of his father's indoctrination? Although at this time he felt no hope for his own salvation, he also felt more joy in the presence of his fellow human beings than he had experienced before. This could only have arisen from his love of her. Though imperfect beings, all of God's creatures carried something of His love and goodness, of that he was certain. Isobel had said that she felt God's love and John longed to tell her of how his thoughts on this matter had changed, though he knew that he had done little to deserve her understanding. Then another horrible possibility occurred to him, that she had been courted and had accepted the affections of another man. He tried not to dwell on this, though he was convinced that any man meeting her could not help but be smitten by her loveliness, her energy, intelligence and passion, as he had been.

He entered by Netherbow Port and headed into the Grassmarket around noon. He felt almost light-headed at the sight of the city, exhilarated by the crowded noise of the market place. He made his way through the stalls packed tightly in between the tall tenement houses. This vibrant, teeming life charged him with a sense of hopefulness for the quests which lay ahead.

He decided that he must first undertake enquiries about Willie's drawings and went to West Bow to where he knew of a number of bookshops, some of which sold art works, drawings and paintings in various styles. He entered the first by a narrow shop front which belied a grander interior of high shelves, packed tightly with leather bound volumes and a long polished table at one end, on which were stacked many pamphlets and papers. On a side wall hung a number of gilt-framed paintings and in the centre two chairs and a lectern standing upon a rug of Persian design. The proprietor, a Master Hutchinson, was alone in the place, absorbed in reading a pamphlet spread on the table in front of him.

When John explained his business, Master Hutchinson, serious-faced and prudent, looked at him dubiously at first as he might have done a criminal or a fence, but his face changed after a first glance at the drawings.

'And what age do you say this child is?' he enquired.

‘He is but seven years old. He attends my school in the parish of Colinton. He has no power of speech and is in some ways very backward and impaired.’

‘Very interesting indeed,’ said the bookseller. ‘Well, Master Wyllie, I think I could well find a buyer for some of these. He leafed through them all, peering closely at each. ‘I see he has taken you as a subject too. A very good likeness I must say. Aye, this is an extraordinary talent. I’ll give you twenty pounds Scots for the whole collection.’

This seemed to John a generous offer when he thought of the impoverished state of the Jamieson family, but then he wondered whether the speed with which Master Hutchinson had offered the sum indicated that the works were undervalued. He had no way of knowing and decided to trust to the bookseller’s honour. John therefore accepted his offer and asked for a receipt to provide the Jamiesons with proof of the sale.

‘If you’ve more where these came from, Master Wyllie,’ said the bookseller. ‘I’d like a look at them too.’

‘That is very likely indeed, Master Hutchinson,’ said John. ‘Thank you for your kind attention.’

Elated by this early success, he called at the stationer’s shop on the same street and bought a heavy sheaf of paper suitable for drawing, some inks of different colours and some more quills. He thought of the possibility of purchasing some paints, as he was interested to see what Willie might be able to create with colour, but felt it wiser to leave this for another occasion and once a level of financial reward from his output was more secure. Besides, he could delay no longer the next part of his quest, which provoked a turbulent mixture of excitement and fear in him.

He set off at a fast pace, drawn by the powerful rein of his anticipation, on the way to Candlemaker’s Row and the workshop of the Fletchers. Proceeding down the slope of the street, some hundred paces from the bookbinder’s shop, he noticed at a glance that something had changed. The sign which displayed David Fletcher’s name was absent. The front of the shop was altered too. There were no neat green-painted shutters and door frame, but instead a rough mess of patches of raw timber nailed crudely in place. John ran the last fifty paces and standing in front, he saw the charred edges and blistered wood of a fire where the door had been. The small window where he had dared to look in all those months ago, to be rewarded by the sight of Isobel, was blocked with a lump of wood. The Fletchers must have gone, he realised, with a surge of panic and despair. What had happened to them? He looked up to the floors above the shop to the windows of their apartments and saw no light. He

knocked with his fists vainly on the nailed boards of the shop front but heard no sound within.

Chapter 14

March 1697

Isobel was glad to find a stall selling salt fish at a modest price. She had a tidy bag of provisions to take back home, with even two bawbees left in her pocket. Every penny counted these days. When she thought back to the days of their life before Thomas's death, she recollected them as times of comfort and prosperity, though the family had never been rich. Still, she and her mother and father would eat well enough this evening at least, she thought, trying to dispel the gloom of her feelings which clung to her like a grey fog. For her parents' sake, she knew she must feign a brave face as they were very cast down.

She climbed the slope of the High Street, passing through the usual bustle of stall holders and joining the stream of people. She turned her head away from the vile place of Thomas's imprisonment, the Tolbooth with its luckenbooths packed on the side by St Giles' Church, and made her way to Master Hutchinson's bookshop in West Bow. He was a pleasant enough man with a prosperous business who would not mind her calling to enquire if he had any work for her, though he was canny and careful, with a clear eye for the profit of anything he commissioned.

'Good day to you, Mistress Fletcher,' he said with a welcoming smile. There were two other people in the shop, gentlefolk, elegantly dressed. The gentleman, who stood at the lectern reading a book, wore a curled wig, a rich velvet jacket and an embroidered waistcoat of satin brocade, while his lady companion was dressed in a fine grey silk gown and crimson lace stole sat on a chair nearby. They were both engrossed in their reading, the lady peering at her book through a lorgnette.

The interior of the shop looked different today and Isobel noticed that one wall was hung with pictures. There were paintings, some in gilt frames, and a small collection of etchings of various Edinburgh buildings.

'Good day, Master Hutchinson,' Isobel replied, 'I was wondering —'

'Mistress Fletcher, I see you're admiring the artistic works, a new venture for me. Do you find them a pleasing addition to my shop?'

'I think they look very fine, Master Hutchinson,' replied Isobel.

The shopkeeper nodded with the hint of a smile. ‘Aye, and I hope as people linger to look, they may think of purchasing something too,’ he said. ‘Oh, I forget, Mistress Fletcher. I have something for you.’

He searched for a moment among some papers upon a shelf, before producing two small bundles of leaves tied together, and handed them to her over the counter.

“The Sonnets of William Shakespeare”,’ Isobel read, ‘Thank you Master Hutchinson. I will start work on them this evening. Do you have a note of the particulars and materials?’

He gave her a paper with details of the bindings and covers needed: inexpensive and plain cloth covers. Though she was grateful to the bookseller, Isobel’s pride was stung. Perhaps this modest commission was merely a gesture of charity, made out of pity for the Fletchers in their impoverished condition. She thought bitterly how, not long ago, many people had keenly sought out the work of David Fletcher, Master Bookbinder. She put the bundles in her basket and folded Master Hutchinson’s instructions carefully.

As she turned to leave the shop, her eye was caught suddenly by the sight of some pen and ink drawings lying on a table near the door. On top was an intricate sketch of a castle and beneath, half-concealed, was what appeared to be a portrait of a young man with sad, dark eyes. She felt her heart jolt with shock as she glanced at it again.

‘You are looking at the sketches I see, Mistress Fletcher,’ said Master Hutchinson and he moved over to the table and took up the papers. ‘Would you care to see them more closely?’

‘Aye, if you will,’ said Isobel feeling her heart quickening in her chest as the bookseller spread out the sketches and she looked into the face of John Wyllie. Hoping that Master Hutchinson had not noted the effects of this surprise on her, Isobel carefully examined the drawings one by one. She was struck by the detail of the pen strokes, the bold and assured style of a highly capable draughtsman. Here was a parish church, then a river scene by a ford, a tall castle which she thought she recognised but could not name.

‘Who is the artist, Master Hutchinson?’ she asked, with an effort to keep her voice steady. She noticed that the elegant lady and gentleman had left off their reading and had moved close by to have sight of the drawings.

‘The artist, well now, this is very interesting indeed,’ said Master Hutchinson enjoying the power over his audience and injecting an air of mystery into his voice. ‘These are the work of a child, a boy of only seven years of age to be precise.’

‘This is not possible,’ announced the gentleman with the dismissive tone of an expert and Isobel turned and saw the two gentlefolk peering with the same curiosity that she had shown.

‘And a peasant child to boot,’ said Master Hutchinson ignoring the gentleman’s remark. ‘I have had them this very day from the child’s schoolmaster. He comes from the parish school in Colinton, a village some miles from here. This boy, it seems, has the power to draw from memory. He can create these works on paper after a mere glance or two at his subject. It is truly remarkable, don’t you think?’

‘And the schoolmaster,’ Isobel said, for she had to know, ‘is the one in this portrait?’

‘He is indeed, Mistress Fletcher.’

‘These are very fine pieces of work,’ said the gentleman, taking up one of a humble cottar’s dwelling house, the intricacy of the stonework and the texture of the thatch reproduced with startling exactitude.

‘How much do you ask for these, my man?’ said the gentleman.

The lady stepped forward and peered closely at the piece through her lorgnette. ‘And you say that these were done by the pen of a rustic, untutored child? I suspect some trickery here, do you not think? This schoolmaster may have some dishonest motive for concealing the true creator of these works.’

‘I beg your pardon, Madam,’ Isobel said, sparked by indignation. ‘I can assure you that this man that you speak of would state nothing but the purest truth.’

The lady took a step away from Isobel, with a twitch of the mouth.

‘Young woman, I would ask you not to speak so discourteously to my wife,’ said the gentleman, moving forward, as though to protect her from some physical threat.

‘Sir,’ said the bookseller, coming to Isobel’s aid, ‘I have met this young Master Wyllie too and believe him to be a most honest and upstanding young man. His father is a minister of the Kirk.’

‘That’s as may be,’ said the gentleman, ‘but either way, these are fine pieces of work and I have a fancy to take one or two.’

The gentleman purchased four of the drawings for a crown a pair. Isobel could hardly bear the ease with which the transaction was made and the drawings rolled and wrapped. No doubt they would be framed and hung in some rich wood-panelled library or study in this gentleman’s grand house. The one Isobel would have given anything to own was now placed again on the bookseller’s shelf, beyond the reach of the two bawbees in her pocket.

She walked back towards home, her mind full of these new discoveries. That John was now a schoolmaster in the country intrigued her. He had not continued with his studies for the ministry, as he had said in their conversations and was proving true to that resolve. Isobel was glad too that he was living away from the fearsome influence of his father who Isobel knew had so shadowed his life. She hoped that he was content. These thoughts of him she now realised, carried no remnant at all of the bitterness and blame which she had once poured upon him.

She remembered instead, with regret, the violence of her rejection of his appeals to her on the day after Thomas's arrest. Though John admitted his outrage at Thomas's blasphemy, she knew also that he had written an eloquent plea to the Lord Advocate to spare her brother's life. But there was no mending what had passed between them. She realised with more hurt than she had ever imagined possible, that she would never know the pleasure of his company again. It struck her like a pain, this recognition of how deeply she had loved him. Even now she could recall how he had looked at her, with eyes so serious, so tender. The very sight of him had stirred her, roused her to desire his touch, to imagine how thrilling it would be to have been kissed by him, to have kissed him. She could not conjure the idea of ever loving any other man than John Wyllie.

Passing the workshop's boarded window, she climbed the stairs at the side of the building, for they did not enter the shop from the street any more, it being secured impregably against further attacks. A neighbour from the floor above nodded to Isobel as he passed her on the stair. She rejoiced in the knowledge that at least some still regarded the Fletchers as friends. She pushed open the door and entered the kitchen to find her parents in earnest conversation at the table.

'Isobel, lassie,' said her father, 'come, sit down with us. I have some news, something of great import to tell you.'

She noticed that her mother's eyes were red and her face blotched with the signs of weeping, though she was much given to weeping since Thomas's death and stayed most days indoors, shunning company.

'Yes, father,' Isobel said, suspicious of his tone.

'Lassie, we are soon to remove ourselves from this city and take work in another town.'

'But father,' Isobel burst out, with the shock of this sudden announcement, 'to go where? To leave Edinburgh?'

‘Isobel,’ he said, his voice thin with fatigue, ‘we are much reduced in circumstances, as you know, you who share our burden and who toil all day and a good part of the night. God bless you for it, but we have no future here.’

‘Father it’s my work and my calling. I’ve never found it wearisome. What are you going to tell me?’

‘Listen to your father, Isobel,’ said her mother softly, ‘I beg you, for he speaks good sense.’

David Fletcher reached out to her and she sat down by him, feeling the weight of his sadness in the grasp of his hand.

‘I have found us some good employment in the city of Cambridge in England, a fine city with a great university and many learned men and merchants keen to stock their libraries. Master Souter enquired of a kinsman who lives in that city as to the opportunities for those skilled in our craft. He kindly gave our particulars to one Nicolas Payne, a prosperous binder, the Master of the Guild who will take you into his employ. And I have a promise of work for an important gentleman of the city, Lord Meddlicott.’

Isobel listened, feeling anger and hurt tighten her chest. ‘Father, how could you do all this? Why didn’t you tell me of your plans? You’ve done all this without my knowledge.’

Her father’s eyes registered a jolt of shock at the violence of her response. ‘Forgive me, lassie. Isobel,’ he faltered, ‘I had no wish to raise hopes and fears against such a plan which might have come to naught. But now I hear that it is secure. We can take up the places, as soon as we are able to pack up and journey to the south.’

‘You mean us to run away to England?’ cried Isobel.

‘Wages in England are much higher,’ persisted David Fletcher with a harder note in his voice, ‘almost twice what we earn here, for it is a prosperous country. I have heard of many of our countrymen who have made their fortunes abroad and in England.’

‘Fortunes,’ said Isobel, hearing her voice ring with arrogance and some spite, ‘no fortunes are made by bookbinders, though it is as noble a craft as any. *I* do not seek to make a fortune father, just to live a good life.’

‘Aye, a good life is all that I crave as well,’ said her father shaking his head. ‘But how can this be with no freedom to think and to speak for fear of punishment? Is it noble to go about in this city, cringing like a frightened whelp, begging for business?’ His eyes, so full of sadness and disappointment, challenged her and Isobel was stung with guilt at her outburst against him.

‘And, Isobel,’ said her mother, ‘would you have us live like paupers, scratching and scraping for a living?’

Isobel could say nothing for a few moments as she struggled to absorb this news. She thought of the thin cabbage soup and dry bread of the past weeks. She recalled her beggarly request to Master Hutchinson that very day, thinking that she and her father might never be able to hold up their heads proudly again as masters of their craft in this city. Thomas’s death had left them so damaged with bitterness against the Kirk, that perhaps this move would be a step to a freer life and the chance of a new start. She saw that her father’s mind was made up and her mother’s compliance secured. There was her duty too, to her parents who had cared for her and loved her. She must help them bear the pains of their banishment and use what skills she had on their behalf. And there was nothing to keep her here.

‘Father,’ she said at last, feeling the last remnants of her anger change to resignation, ‘please pardon my selfishness. I will gladly go with you to this new place.’

The next day, Isobel awoke early to hear the sound of her mother already in the kitchen. The squeak of cupboard hinges, the clatter of pots announced her making ready for their departure. Isobel tried to dismiss the depression which enveloped her as she looked around her small chamber. She had a wooden box where she stored her most precious possessions and, dressing quickly, drew the box from its place under her bed. Some pieces of lace, two fine linen caps and aprons were folded neatly along with her prized books, including John’s French grammar, with its new red calfskin cover, clean boards and binding. She took this up in her hands along with some other volumes given to her by John and plunged them to the bottom of the box beneath the linen.

‘Isobel,’ called her mother, ‘I must abroad to the market to buy provisions for our journey. Will you wrap up the dishes and plates on the table for Mistress Armstrong, for she will give us a good sum for them.’

‘Aye, mother,’ called Isobel, fastening her apron and going quickly into the kitchen.

Her mother stood in her plaid, holding her basket and looked hard at Isobel as she appeared.

‘Lassie, I know it’s a sorrowful leaving we must take, but your father’s resolved.’

‘Mother, I’m past regret now. This is the chance of a new start, a new life for us. Aren’t there many brave souls who set sail to strange lands and embrace their good fortune for such a chance as this?’

‘Aye, Isobel, that’s true. In our heads we may reason it so. It is only the mood of the heart which protests.’

‘Then we must harness our hearts and tame them, mother,’ said Isobel, embracing her before she took her leave.

Her father having gone to the inn to check on the departure of coaches and wagons to the south, Isobel found herself alone. She was wrapping cloths around the plates and dishes according to her mother’s instructions when she heard a knock at the door and opening it, found their neighbour Master Souter standing there, dressed in his brocade coat and neatly bewigged in his usual fashion.

‘Mistress Isobel,’ he said, ‘forgive the interruption for I can see that you’re much occupied.’

‘Master Souter, my father and mother are not at home. If you would care to step inside I can convey a message if you wish.’

‘No, no Mistress, it is you whom I seek. But I cannot tarry, for I have left the shop unattended.’

He lowered his voice in a conspiratorial manner and drew from his pocket a letter which he handed to her.

‘This was delivered to me yesterday evening by a young gentleman who says he is acquainted with you. He was tall and dark-haired, of quite comely appearance in fact, and he was very eager to see you, but found you not at home. He begged me to deliver this letter to your hand. He seemed to be a person of some education and respectability, with no intent to do mischief in my estimation. But, outward appearance can be deceptive, I know. Did I do right to bring this to you?’ he said, dangling the letter delicately between his thumb and forefinger. ‘Or should I take it and destroy it, for fear it is a pernicious message?’

‘Oh no,’ said Isobel trying to control her urge to grab it from his hand. ‘I will have it, if you please.’

Master Souter, still holding the letter, distracted for a moment by the sight of the disarray in the kitchen, looked past her and frowned.

‘Mistress Isobel, you are leaving so soon?’ he said pulling a silk handkerchief from his pocket.

‘I fear it is so, Master Souter,’ said Isobel, bowing her head and staring at the letter in her hand.

‘But when do you plan to depart?’

‘In three days’ time,’ said Isobel.

‘I’m heartily sorry and I think that young man will be so too,’ he said, waving the letter. ‘I’ll come and bid you good bye before you depart,’ he said, mopping brow with his handkerchief.

‘My thanks, Master Souter,’ said Isobel, taking the letter. ‘Good day to you.’

She hoped that her kindly neighbour did not note how swiftly she closed the door behind him. Trembling, she looked at the letter, with her name written in the flowing, learned hand she recognised instantly. Unfolding the paper she found another inside containing a short poem. She read this and sank into a chair to read it again, then clutched it close to her chest for some moments shocked with delight by its content. Then she took up the letter.

Dear Isobel,

I hope that you will allow me to address you thus, with your Christian name, as you once permitted me to do in happier times. I beg you to read this letter, though I know that your anger towards me might lead you to cast it into the fire, for which I would not blame you.

In town today, I tried in vain to find you, to speak to you in person and would dearly wish to be in your presence now to enquire after your well-being and that of your parents. I know that it is impossible for you to forgive me for my part in the terrible fate suffered by Thomas, though as you must know too it was never my wish that he should have been the victim of such a barbarous punishment. This dreadful act has led me to despise those parts of the Kirk institution which mete out sentences of such inhumanity and degradation on those who err, as we all do. I struggle now to find a truer more forgiving route to God, though I doubt now if this is possible, as I have little hope of my own salvation, nor in the humanity of those who rule the Kirk.

Forgive me, Isobel, for indulging my self-pity as I have just this day learned of your trials and sufferings, from Master Souter of whom I sought information on your whereabouts. This troubles me greatly, and I hope with all my heart that you keep in good health and spirits in spite of the misfortunes you have had to endure. I would beg you also, most earnestly and sincerely, that if there is any way in which I can serve you or your family, to send word to me at the Schoolhouse, Colinton where I have taken a post as schoolmaster.

I find the work much to my liking and my pupils, to my surprise, take greatly to their learning and excel beyond my expectations. There is much to tell, which I would dearly love

to impart to you if, and this may be a vain and foolish hope, you could bear to be in my presence again. I can think of no one else in the world whose company and conversation I value more than yours.

No day passes without my mind dwelling on thoughts of you. I have the volume of verse, which you so kindly lent me, with your inscription on the cover as a mark of your own work. I have it by me at all times and harbour a hope that one day, you might permit me to return it to you. I do not dare think of how you may regard me now, but beg you to believe that I am and will always remain

Your true friend

John Wyllie

Chapter 15

April 1697

Susan knew, as sure as night follows day and eggs is eggs, that John Wyllie was in love. She watched him set off to the city that day with a different, joyful look about his face. And didn't she know every inch of that sweet face, from all her secret watchings, in the schoolroom and in church on a Sunday? It was no surprise to her, for how could someone so young and handsome and respectable as he not have won some lady's heart? When men were happy it was usually on account of one of two things, a deal of money or a woman. But what did she know of men? Those she had met in her life were not of the same breed as John Wyllie. There was no man could match him in the whole world.

She ached with pleasure to think how he always greeted her, as though she were someone worth knowing and not the low, foul-faced, ignorant creature she thought herself to be. Of course he'd take a wife some time and leave this place and she'd have to bear it somehow. Shaking herself from her daydream, she went into the schoolhouse, to take John's linen to his room. The schoolroom was empty and quiet, with a faint damp smell. But in her mind she conjured the sight of the children, heads bent over their slates, with John standing in front of them. A rush of sadness flooded into her mind at the thought of life without him, but she clenched her jaw to stop her lip quivering. Stupid, blubbering lump that she was, to weep for a loss that was not yet come.

She remembered that first time she'd stolen in at the back of the schoolroom while the children were at their lessons. She'd left her mistress sleeping, telling Eliza that she was going to collect fire wood from the Dell, a wicked lie she knew, but only a little one. She'd come to the schoolhouse instead and stood outside the door, drinking in the sound of John Wyllie's voice. He was telling the children a story and there was no sound but his voice rising and falling, pausing sometimes at moments of suspense or sorrow in the tale. She's raised the latch with both hands and peeped in.

The children's eyes were wide as they listened, rapt. The story was about sad Queen Dido and how she threw herself into the flames of a fire when the man she loved, Aeneas, sailed away from her to another country. As Susan listened she thought how she would have leapt with joy and gladness into any flames for John Wyllie. God Almighty in Heaven, but he was so beautiful. How would it feel to be in his arms, to kiss his lips, to rove her hands over his body, feel the heat of him next to her –. Suddenly, he caught sight of her, even

though she had crouched down low by the back wall. Her heart thundered so loud he must surely have heard it. But in his look was no disapproval, instead it was a smile of welcome.

When he finished the story, some of the children let out a little moan, for they wanted more. Two of the smallest ones were asleep, their cheeks pressed on the board in front of them. Little Willie Jamieson sat his forehead resting on a paper covered with another of his wonderful likenesses.

‘Come children,’ said John Wyllie, ‘That’s enough for today. Let us say a prayer.’ Susan watched as he gently roused the sleepers and started the Lord’s Prayer quietly, hearing their voices join with his. She spoke the prayer too, glad to give thanks to God that she was here in this place, for surely this was bliss. Then there was clattering and scuffling as the children slid off their benches, most scampering straight for the door.

One or two of the children turned and saw Susan and waved. Mary Jamieson ran to her, seeming not at all surprised to find her there.

‘Susan, you must come the morrow for we’re to hear what befalls Aeneas on his journey,’ she said, her eyes shining.

‘Well, that’d be a treat, for sure,’ she replied, itching to embrace the child. Then she saw that John Wyllie was approaching her too.

‘Good day to you Susan,’ he said, ‘you are most welcome to join us any day if you find yourself at leisure.’

‘Thanking you kindly, sir. And if this be leisure, I likes it very much indeed.’ Susan was glad to find that mostly she managed to answer him more easily now. Sometimes though, when his dark eyes seemed to search her face, see into her soul, she could do no more than mumble like an idiot again.

Willie Jamieson rubbed his eyes with one hand and held his paper in the other, while Mary steered him out of the schoolhouse door.

‘I’ll just clear up in ‘ere a bit,’ said Susan.

‘Thank you, Susan,’ he said, ‘I must visit the Reverend Wallace who is unwell. Thank you for your pains. We may see you tomorrow at story time, perhaps?’

So, whenever she could steal away, she would come to the schoolhouse to share that time.

That day, she watched John Wyllie walk down the track on his way to the city, until his figure had disappeared, then turned to go into the schoolroom. After sweeping the floor, she straightened the benches and forms and polished the schoolmaster’s desk, placing the bible

back in the centre of it. She could not stop herself, silly creature that she was, from stealing into his chamber and kneeling by his bed, running her hands over it, into the sheets, kissing the pillow where he had laid his head. A rude cackle, a crow on a tree outside, startled her as it laughed, mocking her folly. She quickly left the room, closed the door of the schoolhouse and a moment later was on the track leading back to her house, her body smarting with guilty joy.

She found her mistress peevish again, demanding a brandy and water as a tonic for her low spirits.

‘I have had a letter this day from my husband. He writes of the preparations. The Company, they’re to send people overseas to set up a colony in this place called Darien. You’ve heard talk of this before, Susan. Now it seems that they’re all set to collect money to fund the venture. All and sundry are to give some portion of their wealth to build the ships and make ready.’

‘What about them what don’t ‘ave no wealth?’ asked Susan. The Missus sniffed at her ignorant remark and fluttered her hanky about her face.

‘And he says I must go with him. I did not believe he would insist upon it. I know I must, to be at his side, but I’m so fearful. I’ve never set foot on board a ship before and—’ She burst into fearsome sobs.

‘Oh Missus,’ said Susan with genuine pity, ‘don’t you worry none. There’s many as goes to sea each day and don’t think nothing of it.’

‘Susan,’ she said, dabbing her eyes, ‘if I have to go, will you come with me?’

‘Well, Missus, it don’t seem like I got much choice, being your servant an’ all,’ she replied with a stab of surprise and alarm in her gut.

‘I need someone to look after me and tend to me if I get sick,’ her mistress continued. ‘I fear the weather and the air of a foreign place. I think if I go all that way, I’ll never come back. I’ve grown to like this place and have no wish to leave. I don’t want to die in some strange land.’

‘But Missus,’ said Susan ‘perhaps this foreign place’ll be just like home, only on the other side of the ocean. And you’ll be with Master Paterson again. Remember how you didn’t have no likin’ to come ‘ere, first of all. Remember ‘ow you didn’t want to leave London. And look how it’s turned out nice ‘ere. And ain’t this place, Darien or whatever it’s called, like a paradise on earth?’

The Missus sniffed again and looked at Susan for a moment, her brows puckered. 'You're right of course. It's a great comfort to know that I'll have companionship from someone that knows my wants, even though you're only a servant.'

Susan mixed the Missus brandy and water then went to the kitchen to prepare a lightly boiled egg, dogged now by thoughts of being taken overseas, away from this place. Though she'd offered comfort to her Missus, there was none for herself. Now that parting from John Wyllie seemed so certain, she felt an empty pain in her stomach like a hunger only a hundred times worse. And the children, she would never see the children again. As she prepared the food, she struggled to clear the gloom from her mind. After all, Master Paterson was forever a-scheming and planning and most things came to nothing. She'd just put it out of her mind.

Three days later it was, when Susan discovered the truth of John Wyllie's young lady. It made her both sadder and happier than before, threw her closer to him yet drove them further apart. In the late afternoon, Susan was ending a long day of laundry, pressing the sheets and linen. She was weary of the labour until she took up one of John Wyllie's shirts from the pile. She heated the iron again on the grate over the fire and set to. She'd make it perfect for him. She folded it carefully and held it to her cheek for a moment. It struck her that he might need it for church on Sunday so she should take it to him that evening. A sudden, overwhelming urge swept over her. What if their parting were to be very soon? Each moment with him would be precious to her now. She had to see him, if only for that quick moment of handing him his shirt at schoolhouse door.

She took a drink to the Missus who had taken to her bed, complaining of a cold brought on by her nerves.

'Susan, thank you, but I have no appetite. I should try and sleep now, I think.'

Susan helped the Missus with her toilet, bathing her brow with lavender water and finding her a softer pillow to ease her head. As she left the room, Susan hoped that the Missus would fall asleep now and not call her for a bit, to give time for a hasty visit to the schoolhouse. Cook was in the kitchen, half-asleep by the fire, so the Missus would not be alone untended. Susan put the shirt in her basket and left the house, creeping out as quiet as a ghost. A lumbering farm cart moved through the dusk towards her down the hill. The driver nodded to her as he passed. Here was another hurt, to leave this village, for didn't these folks mostly know her now and take her as she was?

She knocked on the door of the schoolhouse, but there was no answer. She knocked a second and third time, her knuckles sor from the blows. He must have gone out, to the manse to see the poorly old Reverend Wallace perhaps, or on some other errand. She could still take

in his shirt and leave it there, though she felt empty with the disappointment of not seeing him. Susan pushed the door open and entered the dark of the empty schoolroom. At once the sour smell of vomit hit her and peering through the darkness, saw a crack of light from under the door to John Wyllie's chamber. She crept nearer and pushing the door open, she saw him. He was sprawled on the floor in a pool of his own sick, senseless or perhaps, she thought for a terrified moment, dead.

Susan's heart jolted. She dropped the basket and ran to him. Oh Lord, she prayed, hearing her own mad whispering. Lord, Dear God, make him not dead. God be merciful please, not dead. But beside him she saw an empty bottle of liquor and picking it up she sniffed it, clutching her nostrils at the sharp reek. He's never drunk all of it, she thought, appalled.

'Sir, sir, wake up,' she said, shaking him by the shoulder, but he was out cold. She could see his stomach rising and knew that there was breath in him at least. The butt end of a candle burned by the bedside and she leapt up to find another which she lit by the weak flame of the first. Then taking the stump to light her way, she went in search of a bucket in the yard which she filled with water from the pump. On her knees beside him, she mopped his face with her dampened apron and he stirred slightly, moaning in response to the cold water. Then she cleaned up the mess on the floor. She'd seen many a drunk in her time, even gentlemen fallen into the gutter in the London streets. It shocked her, though, to find her beloved schoolmaster in such a state. Wasn't he above such things?

She slapped his face gently, called to him, shook him again but he remained in a state of near lifeless stupour. Muttering to herself, she stripped off his filthy shirt and encircling him with her arms, heaved him up on to the bed, feeling his dead weight and his body against hers. Her heart pounded in her chest with the effort of lifting him and this closeness. Unable to help herself, she laid her hand upon him gently and stroked his chest, longing to kiss it, but he groaned and his eyes flickered for a moment.

His face was shining with sweat, so she wiped it with water again and covered him with a plaid which lay on the bed. Breathing hard from her exertions and the excitement of her fear, Susan took a stool and sat back by his bedside and watched. She would not leave him, for fear that he would throw up his stomach again and choke on the stuff.

For some time she sat, watching him breathing, mouthing a prayer of thanks, for what was a little drunkenness when she thought he might be dead? It was natural for all men to swill themselves senseless on occasions, she supposed, even an angel like him. She rose again to clear away the bucket and the soiled apron, taking them out to the yard. On her

return to the room, she found a paper on the floor near where he'd been lying. It looked like a letter, for there was ink writing all over it. She lifted it carefully and placed it on the bed beside him. His eyes were still closed but he'd started mumbling and moaning. 'Isobel, Isobel,' he murmured and then some other garbled stuff which Susan couldn't make out.

'Sir,' she said, grasping his arm, hoping that at last this was a sign that he was coming back to himself. He opened his eyes and rubbed his brow with his hand.

'Susan?' he said with a puzzled look, his words slovenly in his mouth because of the drink. 'Susan, what are you doing here?'

'You was took poorly, sir,' said Susan, trying to hide a smile, feeling the relief flood through her. 'I came here with your shirt what I washed and I found you.'

He covered his face with his hands and moaned. 'Susan, please pardon me,' and he tried to sit up.

'No stay there, sir,' she said easing a bolster behind his head. 'You ain't fit to get up. You needs to rest.'

'Susan, I'm a wretch and a sinner.'

'Oh, I wouldn't say that, sir. There's many as takes a drop too much o' the grog and suffers for it. But it's soon over.'

'Yes, but I swore not to take strong drink again. It's a poison to my body, a punishment for my sins and my weakness. But sometimes –'

'Sir, I thinks you've purged all of the poison out of you by now, judgin' by the mess and I don't know nothing about sins. Here, don't say nothing. Have some water,' and she held a cup for him. His fingers touched her hand.

'Susan, thank you for your kindness.'

'Sir, it weren't no bother,' she said and, feeling bold, she added, 'Sir is you troubled by something? Is this the cause?'

She held the paper out to him. He reached for the letter, clutching it to his chest like it was the most precious thing on earth. With an effort, he raised himself up on his elbows and Susan helped him to sit on the edge of the bed, where he bent over, head in hands. Susan draped the plaid over his shoulders and he looked up at her, his eyes hollow.

'I had some news today of someone very dear to me. I read her letter and then lost all hope. But I should have borne my sorrow like a man, not drowned myself in liquor. Why have I no strength to endure this when many have much worse to bear?'

That's it. He's been thrown over by some hussy, thought Susan. The one who'd filled him so full of joy not many days ago. She knew she had no right to pry any more into the cause of this sorrow but longed for some words of comfort to offer him.

'Sir, sometimes it's 'ard to find strength when you needs it the most. But I think it grows in yer. Just carryin' on takes strength.'

He said nothing and bowed his head again. There was nothing she could do that was proper. She rose from the stool and pulled her shawl around her, readying herself to leave, but unhappy to do so. He looked up at her suddenly.

'Susan, may I tell you of my dilemma? I have no one else with whom I can speak.'

'Gladly, sir, if it'll ease your mind,' said Susan amazed, taking her place on the stool beside him again.

He glanced at her, his eyes darkening and unfolded the paper. 'This letter is from the woman I—, from Isobel, for whom I have developed a strong attachment.' He cleared his throat. 'Susan, I love her. I love her to the point of madness.'

His voice broke, but he paused, breathed deeply and continued more steadily.

'Some time ago we had a falling out and I thought that I would never see her again, that I had no hope of her. More than a week ago I wrote a letter to her and told her of my thoughts and my love and begged forgiveness. This is her reply.'

The foolish, wicked wench, thought Susan feeling her fury rise. Does she not know the man whose heart she owns? How could she spurn him, reject him, the best, the most —.'

'This is what she has written to me,' he continued. His eyes scanned the letter and Susan saw the sweat forming on his brow again. 'When I read these first lines, I nearly died with joy.'

"Your letter and your poem have touched my heart and brought back to me both the pain and the pleasures of the past. But I bless you for them and for your kind wishes to us. It gladdens me to hear of your new position in life and that you are thriving. Nothing would please me more than to hear of this from your own lips, though I deeply regret that this will not now be possible, for reasons which I will relate."

He broke off. 'She has forgiven me. She still has feelings for me, but there is no hope of her. She and her parents have endured terrible trials in the city, since —,' he swallowed in an effort to hold his voice steady and wiped his brow with the back of his hand.

'But sir, what ails you?' Susan said, baffled by his state. 'She loves you, sir. What more could you want?'

‘I know, I know, but she is gone from Edinburgh. She is not even in the country.’ He read again: ‘*we must take a new course in life as you too have done. Now, on the eve of our departure to a distant city where we have found work, I must confess something to you.....*’

He faltered, blushing deeply at something else she’d written that wasn’t for Susan’s ears. He paused before resuming. ‘*But I cannot forsake my parents who have nurtured and cared for me all my life. My father, who taught me all I know, now needs my support and help for I must work for our keep in the city of Cambridge where we will travel in two days’ time. I must do my duty as a daughter, which I am sure you will understand. And I must bid you goodbye for God knows how long, though I hope not for ever....*

‘How can I bear this separation from her, now that I know her heart? It would be better if she still hated me,’ he said.

‘Well, that’s nonsense, that is,’ said Susan, unable to check her astonishment, that he should be so bereft for a cause which to her seemed so hopeful. How could he be so beef-brained, he that was so clever, so learned? ‘Sir, your lady loves you. Isn’t that enough to lift your ‘ear? Take comfort from that. And she’s only gone to England, which ain’t so very far away. I comes from London meself and there’s coaches takes people there and letters too, back and forth every week. Write to your Isobel why can’t yer? Then, travel to see her when you may. Sir, there ain’t no need for despair. A little bit o’ sadness, with missing her like, but you ain’t to despair of ‘er.’

A silence hung in the air for a moment. He looked at her with an expression she found hard to read. Then he slowly raised himself up from the bed and turned away from her. He was angry. She’d spoken too insolent and forward, she a low servant with no right to talk back to her betters. He was going to send her away and never let her come near him again. She should have kept her ugly mouth shut. She jumped to her feet.

‘Forgive me, sir, for speakin’ out like that,’ she said, trembling and looking at the floor, to avoid his gaze. She felt him come closer to her. She shivered with fear, waiting for his rebuke which she deserved, foul-mouthed scullion that she was.

‘Susan,’ he said softly, ‘I thank you for your good counsel. I am heartily ashamed that you have seen me in this state of weakness. Your wise words have made me see myself for a ridiculous and self-pitying fool.’

Susan still could not look at him, because her heart would surely burst and she had no words to answer him.

‘Can I beg something else of you?’ he pursued.

She held her nerve this time and looked up at him, as he now stood only a foot from her. She nodded at him dumbly.

‘Would you please not speak of this disgrace, my drunkenness, to anyone,’ he faltered. ‘My position here as schoolmaster— You have seen me in this state—’

‘Sir,’ said Susan, finding her voice return with this affront, ‘I may only be a ignorant servant, but I knows when to hold me tongue.’

Then he did something beyond her imagining which almost stopped her breath. Looking down, he reached for her hand and took it in both of his and pressed it gently. Susan wondered whether this was some kind of dream, for no living person had ever touched her this way before