

## Chapter 16

May 1697

On the day of Master Paterson's meeting, John dismissed the children from school at midday. The gathering was to be held in the schoolhouse on the instructions of Lord Foulis's steward. John was replacing the prayer books on the shelf from the morning's lessons, when a boy burst in panting with exertion and the urgency of his message

'Maister, the minister calls for ye,' said the boy, one of John's eager pupils. 'He says ye must gang tae him straight away.'

John abandoned the books and made his way with haste to the manse, suspecting and fearing a deterioration of the Reverend Wallace's state of health.

The village girl, engaged as a servant and housemaid to the ailing old minister, opened the door. 'The meenister's in the parlour, sir,' she said shyly, taking his cloak in the hall.

The Reverend Wallace, looking shrunken and pale, was sitting in one of the chairs at the fireside.

'Good day to you John. Pardon me for not rising to greet you,' he said. 'Thank you kindly for coming. I've a favour to beg of you.'

'I'll willingly serve you in any way I can, Reverend,' replied John, noticing the waxy pale skin of the minister's face.

'Thank you, John. It's about this matter of the meeting today. I was charged with the duty to clerk for it, to take down the names of subscribers, of those who would put their money into this great venture abroad. But I fear I am not quite in command of myself today.'

'Sir, only tell me how I may help,' said John, coming to the old man's side.

He paused and seemed to have trouble drawing his next breath, but then a moment later rallied himself to continue.

'Lord Foulis was one of the first to lend his support to the mission, with his words and his gold. It seems that he will now have his parish outshine all others in the country. So Master Paterson's plan is to come to fruition after all. From what I hear, all the ships are purchased and the provisions assembled for this great expedition. But there's need of more money, of course. I've called you here to ask if you'll perform my duties today for me. I would not wish to fall down amidst all those folk and the gentry too.'

‘I’ll gladly perform the duty, Reverend Wallace. But is there something I can do to relieve you, to revive you?’ said John concerned at the frailty of his mentor and friend.

‘John, there is nothing you can do, for it is merely age that afflicts me. No, you have served me abundantly well. I could ask for no one more dedicated or virtuous than you. Here, listen to me. I’m havoring on, and not giving you my instructions,’ he said, with a chuckle. ‘Master Paterson travelled down from Edinburgh yesterday to convene this assembly with Lord Foulis, so it appears that even this small part of the country is to be fleeced as well.’

‘But surely most people in the parish have little enough as it is, and nothing to spare,’ said John.

‘Aye, that’s true of the cottars, but there are thrifty husbandmen with a little put by, I’m sure and I fear that the lure of wealth and prosperity makes fools of us all, rich and poor.’

He paused again looking at John as though struck with inspiration. ‘I suppose you’ll not take a wee dram with me?’ he asked, at which John shook his head and smiling rose to find the bottle and a glass for the minister.

The first to arrive in the schoolhouse was Lord Foulis’s steward who greeted John and after surveying the interior of the schoolhouse, sniffed his approval. He carried a large ledger in his hand, which he thumped down on the schoolmaster’s desk. He also brought a metal box with a lock.

‘Master Wyllie, I believe that you are to take charge of this,’ he said, opening the book and turning the pages containing the lists of all those who had subscribed so far. ‘Would you make your entries here, please.’

Next came Master William Paterson himself, his wife and the faithful Susan. William Paterson was a heavy-faced man with a periwig, dark-coated and serious, purposeful in his gestures and bearing. The steward left John immediately and went to greet hm. When Mistress Paterson saw John, her red face broke into a smile and she raised her hand in greeting, taking her husband’s arm to catch his attention, though he was in deep conversation with the steward.

John thought that he ought to present himself, if only to explain the reason for his substitute role. To his surprise, however, William Paterson concluded his remarks to the steward, crossed the floor towards John with a brisk stride, his wife and Susan following behind.

‘You must be the schoolmaster, I assume,’ he said, offering his hand. John noticed the man’s sharp and penetrating gaze, his eyes alight with energy. ‘I have heard much about you from my wife, about your excellent work with the parish children. May I commend you.’

John was taken aback by this unexpected praise and noticed that Mistress Paterson was smiling broadly at him as she stood beside her husband. Susan’s face was concealed by a veil which she wore to protect herself from the eyes of strangers, so he could not read her expression.

‘Master Paterson, it is most generous of you to say, but the privilege is mine, for I have heard much of your enterprises and the promises they hold.’

William Paterson nodded with a curt smile of acknowledgement. ‘And may I persuade you then to subscribe, Master Wyllie?’ he said.

John was saved from the embarrassment of admitting to his lack of funds by the arrival of Lord Foulis, a small but upright figure with an expression of haughty expectancy. His appearance instantly drew the attention and required the presence of his steward and the Patersons. Susan curtsied to John without a word and followed her mistress. John turned again to the book on the desk and took a penknife to one of the quills as he waited for the proceedings to begin.

The schoolroom was filling up rapidly, with many from the parish known to John and others besides. The miller came in with his son, some of the more prosperous farmers, some elders of the kirk and then a group of cottars. There were also some women with their husbands or widows on their own. John saw that even the Jamiesons had arrived. Alexander Jamieson held Willie under his arm, the child’s arms and legs flailing in his efforts to escape the grip of his father. Mary and Mistress Jamieson followed. Some in the assembly looked with scowls of disapproval at Willie’s antics, though others smiled, having heard no doubt of the boy’s unlikely talent and potential fame. Alexander Jamieson lowered Willie to the floor but no sooner had he done so, than Willie’s eyes darted about like those of a cornered rabbit, and then seeing John, he scampered towards him and cowered at his feet, concealing himself behind the desk. Mary and her father made to come after him, but John stooped down and spoke quietly to the crouching child.

‘Come Willie, can you hold these quills for me?’ he said, hoping that the boy would not shout or scream as he sometimes did when troubled. John held out four feathered quills to the boy which he grabbed quickly and held in his fist.

‘Willie, come here,’ said Mary pushing through to where John stood and whispering desperately at her brother. ‘Sir, I’m right sorry, sir. He doesnae like the noise and all the people.’

‘Don’t fret, Mary,’ said John, noting that Willie sat calmly now, stroking the feathers against his cheek and moaning quietly. ‘Perhaps you can stay with him here, by me and hand me a quill as I need it.’

‘Truly sir, can I?’ said Mary with a look of pleasure and disbelief.

John ushered the children behind him, nodding across the room to the Jamiesons to indicate that all was well. As all of the eyes of the company were trained on the important gentlemen some paces away, John was glad to see that this small disturbance went largely unnoticed. Lord Foulis stepped forward to address the assembly.

‘Good people of the parish of Colinton,’ he announced, ‘we are privileged to welcome today Master William Paterson, a gentleman know to this parish, whose generosity has already benefited our school. Today, however, he brings before you a proposition of great import. He is, as some of you will know, a man of business, a great entrepreneur who laid the foundations of our grand trading company, “The Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies.” Master Paterson, if you will.’

Lord Foulis gestured to William Paterson who stepped forward and cleared his throat.

‘Thank you, my lord,’ he said, quickly surveying the company. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, good people, I am here today to tell you how a simple idea can grow to become the greatest opportunity this country has ever seen. For several years now, I have known of a place sitting at the very door to the seas, an opening for trade with China, Japan the Spice Islands, a speedy route to riches. Why should other countries like England and Holland be the only ones to profit from trade overseas? The world is vast and rich for those that have the spirit to seek out and seize the chances. Scottish industry and talent, with God’s help, can prove this country a force to be reckoned with.’

‘No matter who you be, laird or lady, master or servant, cottar or husbandman you can play your part in this our most magnificent enterprise by making your own contribution to the great Company of Scotland. You will not only being making a goodly sum for your family, but will be endowing our country with a chance for illustrious and profitable foreign trade the world over. With your subscriptions we will do great things. It is well known that trade will increase trade and money will beget money. There is hardly a man in the country who has not pledged his money to this venture, with pride and the certainty of prosperity. So

sign up here today, no matter how big or how small is your sum, to make our country great. Your schoolmaster here will take your details. ’

There was a hum of talk and of movement as people drew out their purses, conferred with their companions or conversed in whispers.

‘Master Wyllie,’ said Mary quietly at John’s side, ‘is it no strange that folks give away their money and get naething in exchange?’

John looked at her, at a face earnest and thoughtful and found that he to a degree shared her puzzlement.

‘Aye, Mary,’ he said, ‘But there are gentlemen, men of affairs like Master Paterson here who know the ways of business and commerce. We must take it on trust that they have knowledge and experience above our own. Money has many uses beyond the immediate buying of commodities, it seems.’

‘But sir,’ said Mary, her brow puckered with concern, ‘my Da means to give all our money, the money from Willie’s drawings, that’s all we have in the world. I wish he’d bought a cow wi’ it, or a book. Just think on the books we could’ve had.’

John was surprised at this news but had no chance to reply as the first subscriber, eagerly holding a handful of silver coins, was waiting at the desk. John had soon filled two pages of the ledger with names and Mary dutifully stood at his side, refilling the ink pot and handing him a newly sharpened pen as it was needed. As the last name was being inscribed, Master Paterson addressed the assembly once again.

‘Good people of Colinton, I am pleased to see that you share my vision of this enterprise. When the colony is set up, there will be no more people in want of work for their hands, but rather this trade will want hands for its work. I have here some bills for your perusal. This paper bears upon it a call to all with able minds and bodies to embark on a new life, to forge a new future and a new country for yourselves and your families. Thank you once again. You shall all reap your rewards an hundredfold.’

As the meeting broke up, Lord Foulis’s steward passed the handbills around. John closed the money box and ledger and handed both to the man, then took a moment to scan the paper:

*The Court of Directors of the Indian and African Company of Scotland, having now in readiness ships and tenders in very good order, with provisions and all manner of things needful for their intended expedition to settle a colony in the Indies; give Notice that for the general encouragement of all such as are willing to go upon the said expedition:*

*Everyone who goes on the first expedition shall receive and possess fifty acres of plantable lands, and 50 foot square of ground at least in the chief city or town, and an ordinary house built thereupon by the colony at the end of 3 years.*

*Every Councillor shall have double. If anyone shall die, the profit shall descend to his wife and nearest relations. The family and blood relations shall be transported at the expense of the Company.*

*The Government shall bestow rewards for special service.*

*By Order of the Court*

*RODERICK MACKENZIE, Secy*

Here was a chance indeed for the adventurous or the desperate, John thought.

The schoolroom was nearly empty and John had started to move the benches back into position for the morning's lessons, when he became aware of a small group of cottars at the door, engaged in anxious talk. Mary stood with her parents and John could see she was near to tears and that her mother was scolding her. Alexander Jamieson was frowning and shaking his head. It was then that the realisation came to John that, with his attention drawn to his duties, he had not noted Willie's whereabouts for some time, nor had he noticed the child's disappearance from his chosen sanctuary behind the desk.

'Is Willie not here?' he called to the group as he came towards them.

Mistress Jamieson looked up, her face lined with anxiety. 'No, Maister and Mary's just run home and he's no there either. Pity help us. Where's the wee devil got to?'

'Dinnae fret, wife,' said Alexander Jamieson. 'There's light left today. We'll find him before nightfall.'

'May I help?' said John.

'Running awa' like that, wicked wee sprite. Thank ye, kindly Maister,' replied Alexander Jamieson. Mary, you must come wi' me, for you know best his hiding places up on the heath.'

John ran for his cloak and hat and followed the group outside.

'He might have gone to the Dell,' said Mary, 'for he's a great liking for the water.'

'Let me go there,' replied John.

'God bless ye, Maister,' said Mistress Jamieson.

John strode quickly down the slope towards the river and overtook the Patersons and Susan on their way home.

'What' afoot, sir?' said Susan, pulling away her veil.

‘Willie’s run off,’ said John, feeling suddenly the need for her help. ‘Mistress Paterson, could you spare Susan to help search for the boy?’

‘But of course. Susan, you must go with Master Wyllie,’ said Mistress Paterson.

‘But do you not need Susan, my dear?’ said her husband.

‘No, William,’ said Mistress Paterson, with a look tinged with disdain at her husband.

‘The poor child is in greater need than I. And aren’t you here now to accompany me home?’

Together John and Susan soon reached the path leading to the river, past the mill house, the gushing mill race, the mill pond and entered the thick wooded glade of Colinton Dell. John pushed ahead, his feet slipping and sliding on the muddy surface of the path which ran alongside the river.

‘Take care, sir,’ called Susan coming behind.

The burn narrowed and widened in its descent, sometimes tumbling in a narrow torrent over rocks and in other places broadening into wide pools fed by these streams. The sounds of the rushing water and the flap of birds, surprised by their presence seemed greatly amplified to John as his eyes scanned the river banks, clad with fresh young nettles and ferns. There was a large pool up ahead, he knew, for he had walked there several times, when he needed solitude to indulge his troubled thoughts. He heard Susan’s tread close behind him.

‘Willie, where are you?’ she called into the trees. ‘Willie, please come ‘ere, me dearie.’ Her voice was tight with anxiety. John felt a stream of cold air on his face like a whisper of forboding.

There ahead, around the bend of the meandering path, John glimpsed the smooth surface of the pool, with moss-covered boulders edging it and a great fallen branch leaning over the water like a long arm. The finger of the branch was pointing down at something, a small brown shape, a bundle of clothing, an unmoving form in the middle of the glassy water.

‘Dear God in Heaven,’ John prayed as he tore off his coat and boots and as Susan’s howling cry filled the woods. He plunged into water so cold that his breath was stopped for a moment and he felt his feet slip out of his depth, but a few rapid urgent strokes and painful gasps for air brought him to the child. He grabbed for the clothing and kicking strongly, hugged the inert body to his chest and swam back to the bank. Susan lifted Willie from his arms, a soaking limp bundle, as John scrambled out of the pool. Susan moaning softly now, rocked the boy in her arms, kissing his face.

John felt his teeth chattering with cold, threw on his coat and boots and picked up the lantern, finding himself choked and speechless.

‘Poor innocent little lamb,’ Susan wept, ‘my poor little soul.’

John put his arm around her shoulders and they stood for some moments looking at the still, peaceful face of the child, before John found his voice again.

‘Come Susan, we must take him home.’ He urged her gently along the path by the bank of the Water of Leith, the treacherous, slippery bank where Willie had fallen some hours ago and died in the deep water there alone.

## Chapter 17

The Kirk Session met in a dimly-lit back chamber of the manse. On this day, the gloom hung thick with the shared sorrow of those who stood before the bench at which sat the Reverend Wallace and four dour-faced elders. John stood alongside Alexander Jamieson, his wife, Mary and Susan. Behind them were assembled some of the Jamieson's neighbours as well as the miller and his son, who had been roused by the events in the Dell.

'Master Wyllie, you brought out the unfortunate child, did you not?' said the Reverend Wallace, the lines of his face dragged down with sadness, his voice unanimated. John heard the escape of a sob from one of the women behind him.

'Aye,' said John, clearing his throat, remembering the look of Willie's small face, bluish white. 'I think he had been in the water for some time.'

'And how did he come to get into the pool, do you suppose?' asked one of the elders.

'I believe that he must have slipped on the bank, for the path alongside was wet with mud,' John replied, hearing Mary's quiet weeping close to him.

'And the boy ran away from the assembly in the schoolhouse?' said another of the elders, glancing at the old minister who sat head bowed, seeming to have withdrawn from the proceedings. 'Master Jamieson?'

Alexander Jamieson took a step towards the table and looked back at the elder, as he crushed the bonnet in hand, his face grey.

'He wouldnae tak' a telling. He was off and awa' all the time. The girl was forever chasing after him,' said the cottar, his voice dulled with weariness.

'And he could not swim?' said the same elder.

Mary sobbed. 'He liked the water. He was always wanting to go by the pools and the burn. He'd climb on the branches and – But he couldnae swim. I didnae notice he'd gone.'

'Child,' said the Reverend Wallace, raising his head and looking at Mary, 'there is no blame to be cast at you, or anyone else.' Murmurs of assent joined with the sound of Mary's continued weeping.

'I think we can declare this poor child's death a tragic accident, gentlemen,' said the Reverend Wallace, as the elders nodded their agreement. The minister's pale eyes gazed ahead as if at something in the distance. 'But the pity of it, poor wee soul, the pity of it. May he rest in the bosom of the Lord. Let us pray.'

The next day, the Reverend Wallace conducted Willie's funeral. John worried that the frail old man, swaying a little as he stood, would not manage to finish the service. John

held his arm to support him as they stood at the graveside. As he watched the dirt hit the small coffin, John mourned the loss of Willie, his extraordinary gifts gone forever, except in the small legacy of his remaining drawings. Perturbed, he found himself railing at God for this cruelty and thinking of poor, blighted Susan who seemed to feel the child's death as though he had been her own. She stood hidden behind her veil alongside the Jamiesons, holding Mistress Jamieson's arm as she wept. John, at the sight of the woman's swollen belly, prayed that here might be the promise of some comfort to come for the family in their grief.

Mary did not appear at school for some time. John knew that the likely causes were not only her sorrow at the loss of Willie but also the pain of her guilt. She had been the guardian of her wayward young brother and now he was dead. John himself knew only too well how guilt can gnaw at the mind of one who has caused indirectly the death of another.

Two weeks after Willie's death, when Mary had still not come to school, John determined to visit the Jamiesons, for he knew Mary's love of learning. He missed her help and her serious joyful presence in the schoolroom. He would not have her neglect her ability through grief, if it was in his power to influence her. In the cottage, he found Mistress Jamieson at her wheel and Mary in the corner winding a ball of yarn.

'Mary,' said her mother, 'the Maister would have a wee word wi' ye. Come you here.'

Mary looked up and John and saw with some shock that her face, now thinner and paler, seemed no longer that of a child.

'Mary, we miss you at school. Will you not come tomorrow?'

She looked down at her ball of yarn and shook her head without saying a word.

'I have an idea of something we can do to remember Willie,' he said coming closer to her. There was a silence between them for a moment. 'Do you have any of Willie's drawings?'

She looked up at him at last, with a sad gaze he could not entirely fathom.

'Aye, sir,' she said.

'Will you bring them tomorrow when you come?'

John's idea had come to him during a sleepless night and it seemed to him entirely fitting as a memorial to Willie. He had the children spend nearly all of the day preparing Willie's sketches for hanging on the wall of the schoolroom. There were a dozen or more of them left, some of the boldest most striking work the child had accomplished, John thought. The

children, at first puzzled and intrigued, enjoyed the tasks of cutting straight sticks to form hanging frames for each piece of paper, at the top and the bottom and attaching twine to suspend them by nails. The drawings were hung together, to form a gallery of pictures which looked very well against the whitewashed walls. The children grinned with pleasure to see the ones in which they themselves were depicted.

Then he asked each child to write out a verse of scripture each, to be placed in the gallery beside Willie's pictures and requested someone to write out his name. James Vernon was the first to volunteer and produced a faultless, flowing piece of script, the equal of work by Willie himself. When they had finished, John called Mary to the front of the class and picked up a bible which he flicked through quickly to find the passage he sought.

'Children, in memory of Willie, Mary will give a short reading from the Scriptures, from St Matthew's Gospel' he said.

John saw Mary's hands tremble slightly as she took the book from him. She started quietly at first, her delivery growing in strength and assurance as she proceeded.

"At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them and said, Verily I say unto you. Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

At the end of the day, after the rest of the children had left, Mary was helping John to replace the bibles on the shelf and stack the slates in the corner when he remembered something he wanted to give her. Going to his room to collect it, he returned to find Mary standing in front of the gallery of Willie's pictures. She quickly wiped her eyes with her sleeve as John approached.

'Mary, here is a book of *Aesop's Fables* which I read myself as a child. I think you might enjoy it.'

She looked up at him, her cheeks colouring. 'Thank you, sir. I'll keep it safe, I promise,' she said taking the book and holding it in both hands as though it were a priceless, delicate object. 'Master Wyllie—'

'Mary Jamieson!' came a sudden shout from outside the schoolroom door. A boy burst in, one of the Jamieson's nearest neighbours.

'Mary, you must go for Granny Gibson for your mother has her pains. Go quick!'

It was Susan who brought him the news when he opened the schoolhouse door to her vigorous knocking early the next morning.

‘Two babes,’ she cried, ‘sir, would you believe it?’ Her face was stretched into a smile which he no longer found bizarre or grotesque. ‘We must thank the Lord God Almighty, as I s’pose it’s Him what done it, bringing those babes safely into this world. But who am I to say? Thank you God, if you’re up there. Or thanks to the Devil down there perhaps.’

‘Shush, Susan,’ John laughed, feeling only delight and relief at this glad news, wishing that he could embrace the good woman in their shared joy. Some might believe that his fervent prayer had been answered. Or perhaps the arrival of these twin babies was a wicked trick by a mischievous deity intent on surprising them all, his feeble, gullible creatures. Or had Fortune been at work, doling out pain and pleasure haphazardly, with no more aim or sense of justice than a blind man throwing grain to his fowls in the yard? He realised also that these heretical thoughts were such as the lively but doomed Thomas Aikenhead might have voiced in the congenial atmosphere of the tavern.

‘Oh sir, pardon me for speaking out so, but I couldn’t help meself for being so glad,’ said Susan.

‘Have no fear, Susan. Your words are safe with me,’ John said smiling at her, ‘but beware of those with less liberal ears.’ As he heard himself uttering these words, he remembered a time when he could not have tolerated such remarks without some reprimand, nor permitted such atheistical thoughts in himself. This realisation shamed him deeply now.

‘And are they thriving, the babes and their mother?’ he asked, to shake himself from dwelling upon this uncomfortable thought.

‘Oh yes, sir, but they’re tiny little mites. Both boys, imagine that! Mistress Jamieson does quite well, but she needs feeding up. There ain’t no flesh on ‘er body. Mistress Paterson says I must take ‘er some good meat and meal, get back her strength. I must go to her straightway.’

The parish church was full for the baptism which was a joyous occasion. The infants, though small, had hearty lungs which filled the church with irreverent squealing. They were named Andrew and John, and Mary had told John that this was in his honour. Mary carried one of the babies out of the church and her mother the other child as they entered the bright sun of a warm day.

But the Reverend Wallace was weak and frail and walked with difficulty. He stumbled on the way out of the church and John caught him as he fell. Other parishioners came to his aid and when they saw that the old minister's breathing was laboured and he was slipping into senselessness, John bid a boy take a message to the next parish to send a physician, there being none in the village.

Someone brought a chair from the manse and the ailing old man, slumped in a faint, was carried back to his house by three of the cottars then upstairs to his chamber. Susan, who had followed from the kirk, with the help of the young housemaid made the minister comfortable upon the bed as John took a seat at his side to await the arrival of the doctor.

John watched the pale face of the old man. His breath was feeble and shallow and John felt the creeping, sad realisation that his end might now be very near. Then quite suddenly, the Reverend Wallace opened his eyes.

'Well that's a strange thing,' he said faintly, his eyes blank with momentary confusion. 'I had a mind I was in the kirk. Were there two babes?'

'Reverend Wallace, just rest yourself for a while, for it was only a faint,' said John, touching his arm. 'You baptised the two Jamieson infants. All is well.'

'Aye, aye,' he said, his words slurred but calm. 'That's good. I fancied for a moment there I'd gone. But I've not long now, John.'

The door opened and Susan came in carrying a tray with a cup of steaming liquid and a small glass of whisky. The old man's eyes lit up. 'Now there's a good woman knows what I need,' he said with something like a chuckle.

'This'll bring yer round a treat, sir,' she said approaching the bed as John rose to make way for her. She steadied the old man's hand as he reached for the glass of amber liquid which he downed in two swift gulps. 'Now you best 'ave this too. Master Wyllie'll make sure you drinks it, won't you sir?' she said, looking at John who nodded at her, glad to comply. She placed the steaming infusion on the small table by his bed. She left a moment later and John noticed that spots of colour had returned to the old man's cheeks.

'A kindly soul indeed, that woman. Not the bonniest of God's creations, but one of the best,' murmured the Reverend Wallace.

'Aye,' said John, 'that's the truth.'

The doctor arrived an hour later and pronounced that the Reverend must be kept calm and comfortable, with someone to watch over him at all times. On taking his leave, the doctor nodded with the solemnity borne of experience when John sought confirmation that the old minister's end was near. The little housemaid came to take up the vigil and John bid

her send for him if the minister's condition worsened. John left the bedside of the Reverend Wallace with a sense of emptiness at the prospect of losing this kind mentor and friend.

On the track to the schoolhouse, in this mood of despondency, he was surprised by the sound of hoof beats behind him and turned to see a messenger, a bag slung over his back, bringing the post from the city.

'You're no the master of the school yonder?' enquired the man.

'Aye, I'm he,' John replied, his heart pounding, thinking of the letter he had hoped for daily since Isobel's departure from Edinburgh.

'Here,' said the man, taking a folded and sealed letter from his bag and handing it down to John.

'Thank you kindly,' said John, glad to find coins in his pocket sufficient to pay the man.

He grasped the letter eagerly, recognising immediately Isobel's hand and ran the remaining distance to the schoolhouse. In the privacy of his chamber, he opened the letter with shaking hands.

*Peas Hill, Cambridge*

*April*

*Dear John,*

*I do not know how long this letter will take to reach you, but I hope with all my heart that whenever it does, you are in good health and spirits and continue to prosper.*

*I am glad to report that we are quite well settled in Cambridge. We have been here but a few days, but already have employment and comfortable lodgings. I have still much to see of the city, and there are many sights to admire in it, though it is quite small, much smaller than Edinburgh. I think that you would very much esteem the magnificence of the colleges, their chapels and the churches. There are many scholars and learned men about the place and booksellers aplenty so there would be a feast of reading for you. We have walked along the banks of the river, which is narrow and smooth and carries a multitude of small boats at all times of the day. The weather is warm and balmy and it is pleasant to be outdoors. I hope to explore this place, in the few hours of leisure which may come to me, and I look forward to telling you more of the city and its inhabitants, if you would wish to hear of it.*

*My father and mother are well, though they feel their separation from our native land keenly I fear, as do I, though we are also aware of our good fortune in many things. My*

*employer Master Nicolas Payne, a prosperous and generous man, though I may say a little too full of his own importance, has set me to work and much of it there is, for people have a high demand for books, of which I am glad. His son, I must say has not his father's manners, but I will not, fortunately, find myself much in his company. I am pleased to be earning my living in my own right, though I must curb my desire to follow my own inclinations in my craft and learn the obedience and discipline to be directed by my masters.*

*There, you have the best and the worst of my first impressions and I beg your forgiveness for my forthright words, though I trust to your forbearance to overlook this flaw in me, as you have done so generously in the past. John, though I cannot speak to you and see you in the flesh, I must confess that I have your likeness in pen and ink, composed by your gifted young pupil, and acquired from Master Hutchinson before we left Edinburgh. It comforts me to look on your portrait and to imagine that perhaps some day soon we may meet again. But if you will speak to me through your written words, I can imagine your voice too and think myself not so very far removed from your presence.*

*May God bless and keep you, as safe and secure as the loving thoughts of you which are locked in the heart of your friend*

*Isobel*

John, filled with delight, spent the evening composing his reply to Isobel. That she had his portrait thrilled and saddened him, as he thought of how poor Willie Jamieson's talent now helped them to maintain their connection. He hoped that the advent of the summer would find him with some time free from his duties. He would speak to the Reverend Wallace, if he were well enough, to ascertain when the school would be suspended, in order to plan a journey to Cambridge. He would go to Isobel, see her father, offer himself as a husband to her, with the promise of support for them all back in Scotland if that was their wish. Or he would seek work anywhere at their bidding. He tried to curb the doubts that crept into his mind that David and Jean Fletcher might repel him, for his role in Thomas's downfall. Would they be able to forgive him and accept him as a suitor to their only and most precious daughter?

On arriving at the manse the next day, he found the Reverend Wallace lying motionless and apparently asleep. But his eyes opened at John's arrival and his gaze was clear as he beckoned with a weak wave of the hand, as though eager to impart something of importance.

‘John, how good to see you,’ he said. ‘Come here. I’m near my end. I feel it, but I fear it not at all. What pains me most is that I must give up the work that I love and pass it on to another. But there are things I must tell you.’

John took a seat at his bedside and the old minister reached out and grasped his hand.

‘If the Lord had blessed me with a son,’ he said, ‘then I would have rejoiced in such a one as you, a better one no man could wish for. I must confess, I am envious of that father of yours. I met him once, you know. You have not taken after him much, I think. Have you seen him of late? ’

‘No, I have not,’ said John, alarmed at the turn of the conversation.

This mention of his father shocked John with the return of familiar sensations, a dark shadow in his mind and a sickness in the stomach. He had given scarcely a thought to his father since his first day in Colinton, he realised. And at that moment John longed to tell the Reverend Wallace that the old minister’s fancy to be a father to him was reciprocated.

‘My father and I—,’ John faltered, ‘I regret, have not been as close as father and son should be.’ He felt the grip of the old man’s hand tightening with the urgency of what he still had to impart.

‘I raised the matter of a new minister for this parish with the elders some time ago,’ the Reverend Wallace continued. ‘I told them they must choose a new minister and not wait until I am in the ground. It seems they have found and elected a new incumbent already. I only heard of it yesterday and I’m not so easy in my mind about their choice. I must tell you who it is, John, for I think you should be prepared for it. The minister who has been appointed here is none other than the Reverend Archibald Wyllie, your own father.’

## Chapter 18

May 1697

Cambridge

‘You’ve a steady and a gifted hand, Mistress Fletcher,’ said Nicolas Payne, leaning over Isobel’s shoulder as she worked. She was at the stitching machine completing an end, using a recessed technique with which she was quite familiar, though she felt her fingers tighten under her master’s scrutiny.

‘Hm, yes, very nice,’ he murmured, whispering so close to her ear that she felt the stream of his breath on her cheek. Isobel winced and saw his plump hand come to rest on the bench to her right, his body encircling her, hemming her in.

She shrank from him and pressed herself closer to the bench, trying to assume a tone of busy briskness. ‘I know most of the methods commonly in use,’ she said, ‘and the finishing processes too, blind and gold tooling, as well as embroidered covers. I have both copied and created my own designs.’

‘Well, have you indeed, Mistress Fletcher?’ he said. ‘But that was in the north, where tastes are perhaps a little less, let us say, refined and sophisticated. We do things a little differently here, as you see. Women I find, excel at the simpler preparatory tasks, sewing, end leaves and such like, all the forwarding work. But the finishing, the truly artistic work, that is best left in the hands of men.’

In her mind Isobel had a ready response but bit her tongue, for she could ill afford to lose this place and she could not deny that Nicolas Payne had been generous to take a woman into his workshop. His business, one of the largest bookbinders in Cambridge, was an impressive enterprise in the volume of the industry and workforce. Four or five times the size of their small shop in Candlemaker’s Row, it was furnished generously with the machinery of the bookbinder’s craft, several sewing frames and lying presses of a more modern manufacture than the Fletchers’ own. It was a thriving business and Nicolas Payne commanded two journeymen and one apprentice. The workshop was high-ceilinged, spacious and light, by virtue of the tall windows of glass, where the sun streamed in on to her bench. Isobel was used to creating a book from its birth as a stack of raw printed leaves to its gradual transformation into a work of decorative art. Here her work was to be only forwarding not finishing, which irked and frustrated her, not least as finishers earned more.

But Isobel was becoming accustomed to this new working regime and acknowledged some vestige of pride that she was earning her bread and helping to support her parents in this

new life to which they had come as fugitives. It seemed to her far more than one month ago that she and her parents had first arrived in the city. It alarmed her too that her Edinburgh self and that other life now almost seemed to belong to someone else. So much had happened in this short interval of time.

When they had first arrived in the city, they had been fortunate to find good lodgings, in Peas Hill in a tall, timber-framed dwelling, housing people of many occupations. They had two rooms on an upper floor, with fellow tenants who were mostly civil to them as strangers far from home. Their first days in this new city were better than they had feared too.

As they broke their fast on the day after their arrival, David Fletcher offered to accompany Isobel to her place of employ, noting her silence which concealed not a little anxiety on her part.

‘I will come with you, lassie, for I’m eager to meet this Master Nicolas Payne of Aungeres Lane and see his workshop,’ he said.

‘Thank you, father, but I can go happily on my own, if you and mother have other business to attend to.’

‘Lassie, I’ll not have you walking the streets of this strange town, this first time alone and unprotected. Jean, will you come along with us?’

‘No, David,’ replied Jean Fletcher, with a note of her old determination that Isobel was pleased to hear had returned. ‘I’ll stay here and put our rooms to rights and then go to the market, for we have nothing for supper. I’ve a good Scots tongue in my head will serve me well enough, no doubt. I’ll be well occupied. Have no care of me.’

So Isobel and her father set off towards the workshop of Master Nicolas Payne. The streets contained a remarkable mix of buildings: overhanging timber-framed dwellings, some of the meaner sort, cheek by jowl with walls and gardens of grand stone edifices of colleges and halls. Soon they came upon the market square where traders were setting up their stalls, which made Isobel feel a little more at home. Though the shouts of traders were in accents strange to her, the purposeful housewives, servants, plump women selling loaves, boys with nets of cabbages, carts rolling in with produce from the farms, and drovers with flocks of sheep spoke more of what was common to men and women wherever they were in the daily business of living.

‘Aye, it’s a prosperous country,’ said her father, ‘with little sign of famine and shortages. It pains me to think of our poor folk at home.’

Isobel agreed and slipped her arm into her father's, feeling also a flutter of excitement and hope at their venture. 'Father, this seems a good town. You did right to bring us here, though it means admitting I was in the wrong,' she laughed.

David Fletcher squeezed her arm as they walked and smiled at her. 'Aye and that's hard for you, my dear lassie, for you're one that knows your own mind.'

Nicolas Payne's large bookbinding workshop lay in a lane close to the busy quay on the river. Adjoining the workshop he kept a shop selling books, stationery, pictures and other objects of decoration for the homes of the rich. He was clearly a man of substance, prosperity and position. His residence was a smart town house nearby which he shared with his son, a daughter and his wife, who it was said was delicate in health and did not go much abroad. On that first day, Master Nicolas Payne greeted them warmly.

'My dear Master Fletcher, and this is your daughter. I have expected you eagerly these two weeks. Come this way.'

He was a stout man of around forty years of age, with a not unpleasing countenance, though his eyes were small and his cheeks inclined to plumpness. He was fashionably dressed in a wig of shining ringlets, and sported a long brocade waistcoat over a fine linen shirt. No bookbinder of Isobel's acquaintance would have donned such garb and she noted her father's expression as Nicolas Payne examined their appearance, no doubt finding them very drab in their plain artisan dress.

'Come into my workshop and meet those of my employ. Master Ruddock, Master Smith, Joe Taylor,' announced Nicolas Payne to two men, at their benches and a boy piling up a bundle of leaves in the corner. 'These are the Fletchers just arrived from the north.'

The two journeymen looked up and nodded at Isobel and her father, but seeing that they were persons of no importance did not rise to meet them. Joe the apprentice, a small, eager-faced youth of around fourteen years, scurried past with the leaves stacked ready for stitching and bid them both a hasty good day.

'Let us step into my private office for a moment,' smiled Nicolas Payne to Isobel's father, 'to discuss the terms of your daughter's employment. I am exceeding grateful for your arrival, I must own,' he continued as Isobel and her father stood in his room. He took up his position behind a large desk above which were clusters of papers stuffed into nests of small shelves suspended on the wall.

'Sit yourselves, please. Take your ease,' he said smiling and leaning back in his chair. 'I have more work than I can deal with and I have just gained an official appointment to Lord Robert Nevile which is why I am in urgent need of extra hands. I understand that you

have found a patron too, Master Fletcher,' he said, leafing through a bundle of papers on the desk, without expecting any response from Isobel's father who gave him none. 'I find myself with less and less time to undertake any of the work myself, having so much to attend to in the world of commerce, you know. And, my son Francis, who had a mind to follow me into this noble craft has since changed his mind and now fancies himself a scholar. He will matriculate at the university this autumn.' He sniffed with unconcealed pride.

So Isobel started work that very day and her father bid her goodbye to seek out his patron, who lived in a village some miles distant. Isobel stitched all day at the frame, according to the instructions of first Nicolas Payne and then Master Matthew Ruddock, one of the journeymen, a morose individual with hunched shoulders. Her back ached after a time, but she did not dare to rise from her place and walk about, as she did in their own workshop at home. She felt the constraint of the silent industry of the others. In the air hung a certain tension, though she was not sure whether this was her fancy or arose from some ill will towards her, as a foreigner, a woman or perhaps even as a rival.

Throughout this first day Nicolas Payne came several times to the bench where she worked, lingering close and peering over her shoulder. She was glad that her hands were so schooled and skilled in their practice, as she felt her body tighten with unease in his presence. In the afternoon, he did not appear in the workshop and to her relief she was left to work on alone. Near the end of day, however, a stocky, thick-legged young man appeared in the workshop and strolled idly around for a while. He was a youth of around sixteen years of age, dressed in blue silk breeches and an embroidered waistcoat, his long hair curled in the manner of a wig, his round face revealing him to be the offspring of Nicolas Payne.

Isobel, after a quick glance, bent her head again to her work.

'You're the new servant,' came his voice, which made her start for she had not heard or seen him creep so close to her. 'I am Francis Payne, son of the master, in case you were wondering. And who are you?'

'Isobel Fletcher, bookbinder, late of the city of Edinburgh,' she replied, keeping her hands on her work and returning his look with one which she hoped veiled her irritation at his arrogance.

'Oh, indeed,' he replied, 'but as a woman, you must needs know your place in this workshop. Still, I can see why father engaged you, I'm sure. I hope he finds your work as agreeable as your face.'

Isobel bit her lip and kept her head bent to the leaves of the book she was working on, hoping that he would soon lose interest and leave her. He lingered only a few moments

longer before quitting the workshop by the door he had entered. Weary with the strain of her first day and with a troublesome sense of unease, she finished the last job on her bench. Master Ruddock showed her the routine for locking and securing the workshop, should she ever be the last to leave.

‘Good night, Mistress Isobel,’ said Joe tugging off his apron. The two journeymen nodded curtly as Isobel left the shop.

On her return to their apartments that evening, Isobel was greeted with the pungent smell of a lamb stew and the sight of her mother stirring the pot on the fire. Jean Fletcher seemed cheered, as she had spent some of the day with a kindly widow, one of their neighbours, who had offered her some work at plain sewing. David Fletcher too had met his patron and was to start early the next day in his library.

‘Well it seems, though we are far from home, that we have much to be thankful for,’ said her father lighting his pipe as they sat round the fire after a hearty supper. Isobel was pleased to see her parents more at ease, though her relish of the meal had been less joyful than theirs and her disquiet remained. But she collected a needle and thread to mend an apron and a shift which were torn and settled with them beside the fire.

‘Aye, David, that’s true,’ said Jean stabbing her needle into her work. ‘But Isobel, lassie, you’re close and quiet tonight. Will you tell a little of how you are faring with Master Payne.’

Isobel longed to unburden her mind of her uncomfortable thoughts, to reveal her anxiety and some of the distaste she felt for her employer, but what could this do but harm? She must work, they all knew that, for they had only a meagre sum of money left and another week’s rent on their rooms to pay in a few days. How could she tell her parents of her employer’s lechery, his arrogance and contempt for her skills? No, she would bite her tongue and submit. These and other secrets she must lock away and turn her mind only to her duty and her toil.

‘It’s good to be occupied all day,’ said Isobel with an attempt at brightness, ‘and soon I will receive my wages, so we can sup well again.’

Isobel could feel her parents’ eyes upon her but she kept her head bent on her mending.

‘Is he a good master? And what of the journeymen?’ persisted her mother. Isobel felt her irritation prickle and longed for some solitude. What more did her mother want of her?

‘There’s little to say. I’m employed in my craft. Is that not enough?’ she replied, regretting her sharp tone as soon as the words were out. Now the atmosphere was tense with

unspoken thoughts. A little later her mother sighed and bid her good night, taking herself to the small side chamber, where her parents slept.

‘Good night to you, lassie,’ said her father, knocking the ash from his pipe into the fire and following his wife to their chamber.

‘Good night, father,’ said Isobel watching him retreat. Then she rose to rake the coals and remove her apron. Carrying a basin to the table, she splashed some water from a jug into it to wash herself and removed her gown. Opening the neck of her shift she wiped her face and neck, shivering as the cold water tingled her skin. As she stroked the cloth over her throat and on to her breasts, she wondered how it would feel for a man to touch her there, kiss her with his mouth. She squirmed at the thought of Nicolas Payne’s plump lips on her skin. But John, what she would give just for a touch of his hand. How she wished he had kissed her, had held her close to him, his body against hers so that she might relish those sensations now in his absence. She would write to him that night.

Once the quiet murmuring of her parents’ voices had subsided, Isobel went over to her small wooden cot bed in the corner of the kitchen and from beneath it, drew out her box. Underneath her linen lay the rolled paper which she carefully unwrapped. She remembered with gratitude how Master Hutchinson had sold the portrait to her on the eve of their departure from Edinburgh, for the few coins she had remaining, no doubt out of pity for her plight and her poverty. The steady, serious gaze of John’s eyes met hers and she imagined him for a moment, there with her in this quiet room, listening intently as she told him her thoughts. She tried to recreate the sensation of his hand on hers and the tenderness of his eyes.

What a poor thing a letter was, she thought, when what she craved was his physical presence, to breathe his air, hear his words, touch him. All she could do was to commit some small part of her feelings to paper and hope that he would know the true depth of her love. She wrote her letter and sealed it, then kissed it, thinking of how his fingers would soon touch the place where she had laid her lips. She placed the paper in her apron pocket, to take to the post the next day, folding this carefully to keep it out of sight, not wishing her parents to know of her correspondence with John, for fear of their anger or disapproval.

The next day at the workshop, Nicolas Payne was there at her bench again, staring at her work, leaning over her on the slightest pretext. She tried hard not to recoil from him but could not help the way her skin prickled at his nearness. His stout body exuded a cloying warmth and she breathed the musty smell of his velvet coat. She felt her throat tighten.

‘My dear,’ he said quietly to her, ‘I have not seen a woman with your skill. Such delicate hands, a little roughened by labour, inevitably, but with some smooth unguent, no doubt they could become velvet again, like a lady’s. What pleasure these could give.’

Isobel kept her head bent to her work and swallowed hard, willing him to remove himself, to leave for a meeting or an appointment or to attend to a customer.

‘Have you much business today, sir?’ she said without looking at him.

‘No, my dear. I am pleased to say that I find myself at leisure. I may perhaps take up a little work here beside you, for even I must practise my skill. You may learn a little from working alongside a master of his craft.’

‘I have done that many a time, sir,’ replied Isobel, feeling her colour rise, ‘for I have worked alongside my father since my youth.’ She heard a sharp edge in her voice and hoped that he had not detected it.

‘Hah!’ he laughed and his heavy hand came to rest suddenly on her shoulder, his fingers like plump sausages. ‘Your youth? You’re no more than a pretty little wench. How old are you, Isobel Fletcher, if I may know?’

Isobel took a deep breath and was about to reply, but was mercifully relieved from more converse with Nicolas Payne by the approach of Master Ruddock, the grey-faced, taciturn journeyman.

‘Master, if you please to come and look over the job for Lord Cornwell.’

Nicolas Payne sighed. ‘Yes, yes, Ruddock, I will come directly.’

Isobel looked up at the journeyman whose eyes softened a little, with a look of something she took to be sympathy, in the brief moment of their exchange of glances.

‘Carry on, my dear,’ said Nicolas Payne to Isobel, as he rose. Out of the sight of anyone else, he brushed the back of his hand against her cheek.

Isobel prayed silently that business or anything would take him away and was glad to note the arrival of several clerical gentlemen intent on consulting him. He was therefore occupied in his office for most of the day.

The apprentice, Joe, was a likeable boy with whom Isobel could converse with ease, though he was kept busy by the journeymen all day. Joe was mixing up glues one day, close to Isobel’s bench and he turned to her.

‘Ain’t never seen a woman at this trade, Mistress Isobel.’

‘Yes, I suppose it’s not usual, Joe, but many women work in other crafts and occupations, do they not?’

‘Yes, I s’pose, but don’t you want to be married?’ he said.

Isobel smiled. ‘Why Joe, are you asking for my hand?’

‘No Mistress, I mean well, I ain’t set up like—’

‘I’m jesting, forgive me Joe,’ she laughed.

The boy grinned back at her through his blushes. ‘Well, I wouldn’t mind a wife, if she was as pretty as you,’ he said, sneaking a glance at her.

‘Joe, what a flatterer you are, and so young.’

They laughed for a moment together, he stirring the glue pots with more vigour.

‘Joe, do you ever see Mistress Payne? Does she never go abroad, or visit the workshop?’ asked Isobel, curious to know what sort of woman was wife to her master.

‘No, she’s not been seen out of doors for, well, don’t know how long. She’s very sick and poorly, they say.’

‘Just like his last two,’ muttered Master Ruddock, who had risen from his bench and looked across the workshop at them.

Joe’s stirring hand speeded up again at the sound of the journeyman’s voice.

‘Stop your gossiping, boy, or you’ll not be long for this world, like poor Mistress Payne.’

‘Pardon me, Master Ruddock. I was distracting Joe from his work,’ Isobel said, unconvinced that the journeyman’s coarse tongue was a true reflection of his character.

‘Shouldn’t be women in the workshop,’ he said. ‘Distracting, that’s what it is, though I ain’t faulting your work, Mistress.’

They all turned to their labours again without further talk and Isobel thought that, in the absence of Nicolas Payne, the workshop was perhaps not such a bad place to be. To discover more of her employer, however, only increased her anxious curiosity as to his true character. He had buried two wives and his third was bound very soon, so it seemed, to suffer the same fate. She could only hope that her employer’s interest in her would soon wane when he found her unresponsive to his attentions.

A week later, Isobel was walking home, fatigued from her day’s work but untroubled by Nicolas Payne who had been absent on business for much of the last few days. The mildness of an early summer evening in the growing dusk calmed her as she passed the gateway to one of the colleges which led into a quiet green square and beyond to a magnificent turreted building. A group of dark-gowned students, books in their hands, laughing heartily at some shared pleasantry entered by this gateway and she watched as they ambled along the path to

the college. For a moment she imagined Thomas as one of them. His vitality and love of learning should have been allowed to flourish in such a place as this. She walked on more slowly now, reflecting on how her awareness of his absence, once raw agony, would now come upon her from time to time as a heavy wave of sadness.

As Isobel drew near to their lodgings in the obscure light of dusk, the silhouette of the tall building looked somehow unfamiliar to her. There were lights at more of the windows and the door to the road stood slightly open. At first she thought of fire, and quickened her pace but she saw no sign of flames or of smoke. In the narrow entrance hall leading to the staircase, she heard voices and the movement of people on the stairs and landing near her own rooms. She rushed to the stairs and climbed quickly to the second floor, to find her own door ajar and two women on the landing, one their neighbours, a stout motherly figure holding a jug in her hand. The women turned, their faces tense with the urgency of some action they were about to perform. The stout one handed the jug to her companion and came to Isobel quickly, grasping her by the hand.

‘Mistress, what’s amiss?’ said Isobel, feeling a surge of panic, for she thought she heard the whimpering sound of a woman from inside the room.

‘Isobel,’ said the woman, ‘thank the Lord you’re here. It’s your father. Come quick!’