

## Chapter 19

June 1697      Colinton

‘Quake as you sit in this house of the Lord and hear these words from the Scriptures,’ cried the Reverend Wyllie. ‘You sit here, imagining your sins and iniquities to be hidden from the eyes of God. “Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornication, thefts, false witness, blasphemies,” Saint Matthew’s Gospel, chapter fifteen, verse nineteen.’

He was blasting them to Hell again, with his roaring and ranting. Susan glimpsed his roving finger hovering over the congregation, when she dared to look up. He scanned them all, the vile, sinful creatures of Colinton parish. Susan cringed in her seat, fearing that his horrible gaze might light upon her. She tried to keep her eyes on the rough woollen shawl of the woman in front of her. She would not look up, for his eyes might pierce through to the secrets of her heart. Was it such a sin, she wondered, to love John Wyllie.

Susan couldn’t believe that this scowling man in the pulpit, their new minister, was John Wyllie’s own father. Still, she would endure the man’s grinding gloom, his sermonising that wearied her heart and soul. She would happily suffer her limbs to grow numb in the pews, just to be in the presence of John. But today she was troubled and restless, fearful and full of dread at the change in her beloved schoolmaster. Since the man had arrived, John Wyllie’s eyes had been blank with misery. Now he sat, head bowed, unmoving throughout the sermon. The Reverend Archibald Wyllie’s hollering rose up a note. ‘And I say to you sinners, put away your evil doings and return to the Lord. Repent or ye shall perish –.’ How Susan longed for the gentle shaky tones of the old Reverend Wallace, remembering John’s smile as he talked to the old minister after the service and bade everyone good day as they took their leave in the churchyard.

Susan peeked up at the father again, with his eyes hard as lead shot, the square face, set jaw, mouth dragged down, sour and cruel. Out of his minister’s garb, he would pass for the type of murdering rogue she’d seen loitering about Spitalfields of an evening, waiting to slit the throat of some poor soul, all for a brass halfpenny. How could John be this man’s son? John, this man’s flesh and blood, was as loving and gentle as the Lord Jesus Christ himself to all that he met, no matter who they were, dirty little urchins or even the likes of herself.

Perhaps she should put in a plea with God again, for aid and to calm her mind. Though Reverend Wyllie's God would more than likely smite her for boldness or spit in her face than answer her prayer. He had spurned her hundreds of prayers before, for little Alfred and then Willie Jamieson. Maybe if she begged for more modest things, like for the Reverend Wyllie to go back where he came from, or even for John not to be so unhappy, he might look upon her with more favour. But God wasn't so dim-witted. He'd know she was a selfish hussy who sought happiness for herself. For how could she be content when the one she loved most in the world was in misery?

When at last the sermon was over, Susan had to nudge the Missus who had dozed off, her head falling forward on her chest.

'Missus, it's done now. It's over. We best go,' Susan whispered.

'Oh, yes of course,' replied Mistress Paterson, straightening her lace cap and smoothing her gown with agitated hands. 'Such a long sermon, wasn't it?'

Helping the Missus up and into the aisle, Susan lost sight of John Wyllie, but she saw the Jamiesons. Mary carried one of her darling little baby brothers in her arms. She was a brave one, young Mary, and no little wench any more. Susan longed to walk with the family and perhaps have a chance of cradling a tiny infant again herself. Mistress Jamieson cradled her other child, with her man, Alexander, at her side as they went out of the doorway together into the sun.

The sunlight outside was dazzling bright and the Missus raised her hand to shield her face.

'Susan, I've left my parasol inside the church. How foolish of me, how remiss. Would you go and fetch it for me?'

'Yes, Missus,' said Susan, glad to return, for she knew that John was likely still in there. She squeezed through the last few people back into the church. The minister and John were standing together in the aisle a few yards distant. Neither noticed her entrance and she kept low as she crept in, though she caught the older man's words.

'You must return with me now, to the manse. Do not think of objecting. I will speak with the Reverend Wallace, for you cannot continue like this. Things must be taken in hand.'

John said nothing in reply. He seemed to be staring at the wall behind his father's head, like his mind was somewhere miles away from this place.

'Listen to me, you wretch,' cried the Reverend Wyllie, and Susan saw him, the vicious old blackguard, seizing John by the arm.

Susan started with anger that he'd dare lay a hand on John. Her boot scraped on the stone floor, causing the two men to turn and John to pull himself free of his father's grasp.

'What are you doing here, woman?' The Reverend Wyllie's voice roared round the empty church.

Susan answered as steadily as she could. 'Pardon me, sir. I've come alookin' for something. Missus left 'er parasol.'

John quickly left his father's side and moved up the aisle towards her, seeing and retrieving the parasol deftly in his hand.

'Come, Susan, let us return this to your mistress.'

His jaw was clenched tight, his hand in a fist as they walked together out of the church.

'Susan,' the Missus said as soon as they were over their threshold, 'I have a feverish pain in the head. Would you go and gather me some willow bark, for it makes a soothing infusion. Eliza says there are willows aplenty in the Dell, and the young twigs, she says, are good for easing pains in the body. Would you go?'

'Surely, Missus, for the day is fine and I fancies a walk in the air, after all that gloom in the church,' said Susan, forgetting herself for a moment.

'Yes, I feel low in my spirits too. That terrible sermon and the news from my husband, it's such a weight upon my mind. William is determined to go to this foreign place after all. We leave within the month. So there we have it, Susan, your fate and mine sealed.'

Susan could make no reply for the shock grabbed her throat like a throttling hand. She was to quit this place and leave behind all that was dear to her. But what good was it to add to her mistress's low mood with complaints of her own? She had no stomach today for cheering the Missus. She'd to look to the task in hand.

'I'll go for the willow bark now, Missus,' said Susan, 'That's if it ain't going to be breaking the Sabbath or some such.'

'No, I'm sure it can't be,' said Mistress Paterson, 'not when it's for the good of my health. These ridiculous church laws, I'll never understand them.'

Susan stepped out and breathed the cool air deep into her, feeling a guilty gladness to be away from the Missus and all her gloom. She straightway took the path to Colinton Dell. The mill was silent on the Sabbath and there was no other soul about. She'd no wish to go as far as the pool where she and John had found Willie drowned on that terrible night. She

screwed her eyes tight for a moment, trying to shut from her mind the image of Willie's small body floating on the black surface of the water. It haunted her most days, though she found comfort in looking at the child's pictures that John Wyllie, God bless him, had put up on the walls of the schoolhouse. Today she'd only have to go a little way along the river bank, as she knew there were willows all along the path in the Dell.

Susan entered the path darkened by a roof of branches, smelling the dampness and hearing the quiet gurgling of the burn. She walked a few hundred paces before noticing someone sitting on a log at a spot a short distance ahead, lit by a small square of sunlight filtering through the trees. She saw in an instant that it was John Wyllie, alone. He was sitting, his body slumped forward with his head in his hands. Susan thought for a moment he might be in drink again, on account of his horrible father or despairing of Isobel, so she hurried towards him. She hoped that her coming upon him like this would not be unwelcome, and longed more than anything else in the world to be of help to him.

'Sir,' she said, coming closer. He looked up at her, deathly white in the face, and she started with alarm, 'You ain't ill, sir?'

'Good day, Susan,' said he, 'no I'm not ill.' He rose and she noticed that he was holding a letter. Her mind flitted to Isobel. Oh Lord God, could that ungrateful wench really have thrown him over after all? He quickly put the letter in his pocket.

'Pardon me, sir,' she mumbled, thinking herself a doltish lump, charging in where she wasn't wanted, 'only I was a-worryin'—'

'It's no matter, Susan,' he said, with a smile, so sad she could hardly bear to look upon him, 'you were thinking no doubt that I'd sunk again into that disgraceful state where you found me once before. No, I'll not to descend to those depths again. You have come on some errand?'

'The Missus has sent me lookin' for willow bark,' she said, glad that he seemed more in command of himself again.

'There are some good willows further down the path,' he said. 'Perhaps I can walk with you and show you.'

Susan did not trust herself to reply. Walk with her, oh my Lord what happiness, that he should ask to walk with her.

'I used to come to a place like this near my home when I was a child,' he said as they started along the path. 'I would go there and hide.'

It startled her still how he spoke to her so freely, she being a lowly drudge only fit to clean his boots. ‘And what was you hiding from, sir?’ said Susan, sensing his need to speak his thoughts, recalling when once before he had opened his heart to her.

‘Susan, I think now, though it shames me to say it, for it disrespects my father, that I had a miserable childhood.’

She hardly dared say she was not surprised, with a monster of a father like the Reverend Wyllie. ‘And what about your mother, sir?’ she asked instead.

‘I never knew my mother, for she died in childbed,’ he answered in a neutral tone. Then his voice tightened. ‘God forgive me, for I break one of His commandments, but I hated my father and feared him. Try as I might, even now, I cannot alter my feelings towards him.’

‘Feelings is sometimes hard to shift,’ said Susan, looking at him sideways. They walked on in silence for a few moments. But this was no awkward pause, just a space for sifting and gathering thoughts.

‘And here was I thinking and wondering and wishing what it would be to have a family,’ said Susan. ‘I was a orphan meself and raised in the poor-house. I couldn’t never fathom what it would be like to have a father or a mother.’

‘Aye, I’m ungrateful, I know,’ he said suddenly, turning to her.

The heat rushed to her face. ‘No sir, I didn’t mean nothin’ like that,’ she replied. ‘It don’t take much to see your father’s a stern man. It don’t seem like he’d care much for little children and such like.’

‘You’re right, Susan. You see things, and people, most acutely.’

‘Well that’s amazing, ain’t it, when you thinks how me eyes is so squint.’ She laughed.

He looked embarrassed for a moment and then, seeing her laughter, smiled at her. A small shiver of joy passed over her, for she had lifted the misery from his face.

‘Susan, you’re truly an extraordinary woman,’ he said and his words made her heart leap again.

‘I’m fearful now,’ he said as they walked on, her basket still empty, ‘that my father’s being here, coming to preach in this parish, is a sign of his wish to interfere in my life again. I struggled so hard to escape from him. How foolish this must sound for a grown man to be so shackled with fear, but now he is come again, like a spectre to haunt me, God forgive me.’

Susan heard the tremor in his voice but knew well he was no coward. Strange, she thought, that he should fear this one man, his father, more than a murderous mob. As he continued, she felt her anguish for him smart like a wound.

‘He upbraided me only just now about what he called the laxity of my teaching. He, a minister for this parish now, means to control what I do in the school. I can’t tolerate that. I can’t endure it.’

‘And what does he know, him what hasn’t seen nothing of them little children and what they can do?’ said Susan outraged.

‘His life’s work is to instil godly discipline into all, young and old. This is what he did to me, by the rod if I did not comply or meet with his standards and expectations. Children, he thinks, should be schooled only to read the Scriptures and to know their catechism, not to indulge in stories of pagan gods and myths of the ancients. Children are godless, sinful creatures to him and he sees no joy in them. He finds no joy in life itself.’

He paused and looked away from her, kneading his brow with his hands. If only she could have taken him into her arms, to have held him and comforted him. Susan flushed at her imaginings. Then he carried on, urgent now, as if he had left only a short time to speak.

‘I never knew what happiness was, until I met Isobel and then when I came here to this parish. Since then, I have felt pain too and loss and despair but also love and fulfilment. I will not go back to where he would have me again. My father’s is a hateful form of godliness. I know there are other ways of worshipping God and of doing His work.’

‘You don’t never have to go back,’ said Susan, her face burning. ‘Seems to me you has set yourself apart from him. Stand strong against him, sir.’

Then he stopped and looked at her all of a sudden so that she had to turn from him and harness her feelings somehow, lest they would burst out and destroy the moment.

‘But ‘ave you ‘eard from your Isobel?’ she said, praying that there was good news to tell.

His face changed, brightened a little. ‘Aye, I have a letter from her here,’ he said, taking the paper from his pocket. ‘I carry it with me for it gives me some comfort and some hope to read it again. She is well and is settled in Cambridge.’

‘Come sir, but don’t she talk of love?’ said Susan, feeling relief flood over her, now that she had steered the talk on to more hopeful ground.

‘She does,’ he said, and she saw the colour rise to his cheeks.

She sensed the heaviness lift from around them and saw a slight smile on his lips. ‘Well, ain’t that better than anything else in the world?’ she said.

For a few moments they proceeded along the track, with no further words, but in a silence of mutual understanding that held no strain or tension. That lucky, lucky wench to have his heart, thought Susan. Did she know what a man she held captive?

‘But Susan, tell me a little of your life, before you came to Scotland,’ he said, turning to look at her suddenly. She was shaken with surprise at his request.

‘Sir, ain’t nobody ever asked me about that before. It *was* a little life, till I come here,’ she replied, uncertainly at first. But she saw that he listened intently.

‘I hope you had some happy times, even though you had no family,’ he said, his eyes soft, his voice entreating, comforting.

Something fell loose within her, gave way and she found herself spilling it out, telling him of her worst and best secret. ‘Me, I was a mother once, sir, though you may think it’s not a likely story, being as how I am. I had a little boy, but he was took from me. That’s why I ain’t got too much truck with God, leastways not till now and you showing me the error of me ways,’ she said trying to smile, feeling only the pain of her confession, regretting her rashness already.

John was facing her now, looking at her, with those eyes of his which reached into her soul. There was danger here; she’d lose command of herself if she spoke further. So she pulled back, drew breath and shaking her head, said, ‘Nah, it’s a bad story, sir, how I come by me child and not for your delicate ears, I thinks.’ But then it was too late. Her voice cracked, her lower jaw dragged down, her lips trembled. Tears sprang out and flowed down her cheeks and there was nothing in the world she could do to check them.

‘I’m sorry, sir, I’m sorry,’ she said, and the next thing she was aware of was that he had taken her hand in both of his gently, to comfort her. It was all right, she knew then, to weep freely, safely, here with him and he would listen and not judge her, whatever she told him. She breathed deeply, feeling her hand resting in his and with the other pulled up the edge of her apron to dab at her eyes. But then a sound ripped through the air, breaking it like the blast of a gun. John dropped Susan’s hand at the shout. There, not twenty paces away stood a man in a black coat, his arm outstretched, pointing at them. It was the Reverend Archibald Wyllie.

## Chapter 20

June 1697      Cambridge

Please God, make him not dead. Isobel felt the tight grip of panic in her chest. She ran to her father's side where he lay. There was no movement of his body. His face was a ghastly grey. Her mother sat on the floor at his side, stroking his hair, her fingers combing the wisps of it gently and reverently as for one who had just passed away.

'He fell, lassie. He stood here one moment right beside me and then—' Jean Fletcher's voice was a dry whisper. 'But look, see, is he not breathing?'

Their neighbour, the widow stood above them, letting slip a sigh of sympathy.

Isobel, clasping her father's shoulders, brought her cheek close to his mouth. 'Aye, mother. It's all right. I can feel the breath.'

'Mistress Fletcher,' said the widow, leaning down and uttering her advice in a whisper, 'there's Master Woodrow will come, for he has knowledge of seizures and what not. Shall I go seek him for you? He's brought many round from the palsies. I've seen it with me own eyes.'

Jean Fletcher, disabled by her fear and shock, looked at Isobel pleading for her daughter to decide on the best course of action.

'Aye, Mistress, if you would be so kind,' said Isobel, thinking that action of any sort was necessary, but ignorant of what succour the said Master Woodrow could offer.

Isobel looked at her father's face, eyes closed, his skin filmed with moisture.

'Mother,' she said, 'when did this happen?'

'Oh lassie, 'twas not long since. One moment, there he was, talking to me and the next, senseless where he fell.'

Isobel touched her father's forehead and pressed his hand in hers, speaking close to his ear. 'Father, father. Can you hear me?' His jaw twitched and Jean Fletcher gasped, her hand clamping Isobel's arm.

Some time later, Master Woodrow, the cunning man, arrived with a bag full of his potions and medicines. He helped them to lift David Fletcher on to Isobel's bed in the corner of the room. He trickled some drops of a yellow liquid on to a piece of muslin which he first dabbed on the sick man's forehead and then held beneath his nostrils. Next he drew out of his bag two bunches of dried grasses waving them in a circling movement around David Fletcher's head, before burying them beneath the bolster. A further administration of a

pungent-smelling oily substance produced the response of a slight moan from the bookbinder and a twitching of his lips.

‘See there, the tonic of Calamus does its work,’ said the man, his beady eyes fixing on Isobel. ‘I’ve seen it many times. It revives the nerves of the body, stirs them to action, see.’

‘Aye’, she said, ‘I think he rallies. Thank you for your ministrations.’

The cunning man departed, six pence the richer, leaving Isobel and her mother alone for the night at David Fletcher’s side. They stayed by him all through the night, only rising when the necessity arose to prepare drink and to take bread for their own sustenance, or to get fresh warm water to bathe his face as he lay.

‘Isobel, lassie, what will become of us if your father’s taken?’ said Jean Fletcher.

‘Mother, don’t think it. Pray and hope. That’s all we can do.’

Deep into the night’s vigil, David Fletcher stirred again. Isobel, crouching at his side in a half sleep, roused herself. He was mouthing something, though the words were indistinct. She kissed him on the brow and squeezed his hand, which this time returned her pressure and the relief brought her a little rest at last.

By morning he was fully awake, but still had no strength to raise himself from his bed, as a paralysis gripped the right side of his face and body. His right eye was half closed, its lid folded, his arm and hand without sense or feeling. He could make only a few sounds and so indistinctly that neither Isobel nor Jean could grasp his meaning. They raised him up a little in the bed and propped him with bolsters so that he could take some water from a cup. Isobel, aware of the hour, knew she must leave for the workshop and reluctantly left her parents, running quickly through the grey morning streets.

She hoped Master Payne would not be in the workshop and was relieved to find only the journeymen there. Masters Ruddock and Smith looked up and acknowledged her with their familiar surly-friendly nods and she, pleased to slip into her corner without exchanging words, her mind too full of anguish and worry for conversation, took up her work. She saw how her hands trembled as she tried to thread the needle, once, twice, thrice and failed as her eyes blurred and she ended by stabbing the point into one finger and drawing blood.

‘What’s this?’ said a voice behind her. The sound made her shudder and turn around.

Nicolas Payne’s plump face was there, the ends of his curled wig swaying slightly with the movement as he bent his head towards her, peering at the bead of blood which grew to a bubble on her finger. The blood began to run and she reached for the end of her apron to dab it, but before she could do so, he had caught her hand in his.

‘Take care, you must not let it drop upon the leaves,’ he said and in one movement, thrust her finger between his lips and into his mouth. She felt the wet warmth and softness, then the hard edge of his teeth against her finger and then the strong sucking of his tongue.

Isobel blushed deeply, desperate to escape from him but not daring to pull back with the full strength of the revulsion she felt. Her face burned as she tugged to pull her hand free, but he held fast, capturing her wrist tightly with his other hand. His eyes were trained on her face and his lips pursed together as he sucked.

She pulled at her arm again, writhing her body. ‘Master Payne, please. It’s nothing,’ she said and a moment later had retrieved her finger, whitened and damp but with no visible sign of blood.

‘Why, I think you’re not yourself today, Isobel,’ her employer said, leaning closer to her.

‘No, sir, pardon me. Something very bad has happened. I was distracted for a moment,’ she blurted, hoping to divert his attention and finding that she could not hold back from telling him. ‘My father was seized with a palsy last evening. He now lies sick at home.’

She heard her voice wavering and willed no tears to come. She must not show more weakness, not to him. He waited, poised like a plump cat, ready to pounce on her. ‘But he is recovering, I’m glad to say,’ she added too quickly.

‘My dear, I’m glad to hear it. You are tired with watching all night, I can see.’

Isobel said nothing but wiped her hand briskly on her apron and turned to her bench and the half stitched leaves of the book.

‘Now, my dear,’ said Nicolas Payne, ‘there’s no need to play the unfeeling little wench with me. There’s softness in you, I can see, a soft and luscious core.’

Isobel bit her lip and set her eyes on to her work, praying for him to leave her, but instead his voice assumed a tone of cloying sympathy.

‘I’m deeply sorry to hear about your father, poor man. I suppose he cannot work. Pray give him my best wishes for a quick return to health and strength. I too know what it is to see a dear one suffer, for my own wife lies at death’s door. I fear that her end may come soon, it grieves me to say.’

Isobel could not ignore this confession, though all she longed for was for him to leave her. She turned to him.

‘I beg your pardon, Master Payne. I’m so taken up with my own worries, I give no thought to those of others.’

‘My dear, as I say you have such a soft heart,’ he replied moving closer to her again. ‘It is God’s will. Let us pray that when it comes, her end is peaceful.’

‘Amen to that,’ said Isobel quietly, ‘but I hope that you will still have the joy of more precious time with your wife in this world.’

So Isobel embarked on her long day, unable to rid herself of fears for her father, praying that he should not die in her absence. Nicolas Payne left the workshop straight after this encounter and to her relief did not return. She worked alone in her corner with only her troublesome thoughts as company. At the end of the day’s work, she ran all the way back to their lodgings, bursting into the kitchen to find, to her delight, her father looking more like himself, sitting up and taking some broth.

‘Lassie, we must give thanks to the Lord for preserving your father’s life,’ said Jean Fletcher. ‘See how he’s coming back to us. The widow says she’s seen many folks rise up again after the palsy.’

But David Fletcher’s face was twisted, slack on one side, and he struggled to mouth some words to her. Isobel knelt by him and held his left hand, pleased to feel it press her own.

‘Father, you will be well again. All will be well,’ she said, kissing him, though in his left eye there was the water of tears and no voice came from his throat. Isobel kissed her father again, then rose to help her mother prepare their supper.

Jean Fletcher, stirring the ingredients of the pot on the fire, her back to Isobel, suddenly spoke in a colder tone. ‘A letter was delivered here to you today, Isobel.’

‘Where is it?’ asked Isobel knowing the only likely sender and feeling the shock of excitement strike at her.

‘Here my lass,’ said her mother turning to face her and pulling the paper from the pocket of her apron. ‘And who is this that knows you are here, may I ask?’

Isobel coloured suddenly, dreading the inevitable confession. In the fragility and desperation of the moment she wanted to cause no further upset. She paused, meeting her mother’s searching look.

‘It’s from John Wyllie,’ she said quietly.

Her mother dropped the spoon on the table with a clatter and glanced at her husband, though he gave no sign that he had heard the exchange.

‘How could ye, lassie?’ whispered her mother urgently, ‘You have been writing notes to that young man, he that betrayed Thomas?’

‘Mother, that’s not the truth of it. He was named as accuser by another. Do you not remember how he pleaded for Thomas’s life? Do you not recall his letter to the Lord Advocate?’

‘Aye, right well I do, but it came too late. Thomas was rotting in the Tolbooth by then and that young man’s name was there as witness against him.’

‘Mother, please.’

‘If it hadn’t been for him and his like,’ she muttered with a bitterness Isobel rarely heard, ‘God knows, but all this might not have come upon us.’

‘You’re wrong! Don’t cast blame where it shouldn’t fall,’ said Isobel, the anger and hurt quivering in her throat. Her father groaned and lifted his arm to them.

‘See, it has moved your father,’ said her mother in a sharp whisper.

Isobel ran to his side and kneeling by him, took his hand. ‘Father, you remember John Wyllie. You liked him well, did you not?’

He moved his lips, his eye narrowing with the effort.

‘Isobel,’ cried her mother, ‘will you leave him in peace. How could you distress him so with remembrances of that time? You would remind him of Thomas now? How could you?’

Isobel, exhausted from the day, stung by the injustice of her mother’s accusation, hid her face against her father’s chest, as she had done when a small child. She felt his hand move gently to her head, remove her cap and softly stroke her hair. She did not look at him but wept with relief and gratitude and held him tight.

That night Jean Fletcher bid Isobel sleep in their small chamber, as she insisted on keeping close to her husband throughout the night. Isobel, alone in the room, at last had a chance to open John’s letter. By a white shaft of light at the window from a bright moon, she read his words to her.

*Colinton, 20<sup>th</sup> May*

*My Dearest Isobel,*

*I cannot express how much joy your letter brought to me. I am filled with hope that one day soon I may see you again. When thoughts of you flood my mind, which they so often do, my longing for you is almost more than I can bear. That you have regard for me is the most precious thing I have ever known.....*

For a moment nothing mattered, because John loved her still. Her father's illness, her mother's anger, nothing could blight the strength of their bond to each other. Her heart leapt to read his words, but she had such need of his love and kindness now. Could she beg him to come to her, she wondered. Then she read the rest of his letter. Guilt at her own selfish neediness struck her as she discovered the sadness that he himself had encountered, the poor drowned child, the very artist whose work she possessed and the dying minister who, it seems John loved almost like a father. She lay back on the bed exulting in the constancy of his love for her, filled with hope by his promise at the end.

*.....Isobel, it is my intent to come to you in your new city of Cambridge, and will as soon as my means will allow it. I cannot describe how your absence pains me, but through this pain my love for you is strengthened and enriched. May God guard you and keep you until such time, which only He knows, that we may meet again. You are ever in my thoughts and in the heart of your true friend*

*John*

She picked up her pen and began to write, but the weariness of her body and mind overtook her, until she found her head drooping, her hand weak and her mind unable to harness a clear thought. She would have to leave off and finish it the next day.

David Fletcher's condition improved a little over the next week, so that he could sit up, speak a little more clearly and take meat again. His right side however, was as though frozen, weak with paralysis, his arm hanging loosely, his face dragged down. They had sent word to Lord Meddicott that he was unable to work but received no acknowledgement nor any message in return. Isobel feared for her father. This vigorous man was now so reduced, so dependent and broken. What would it do to his mind to be incapable? Each evening she sat and read to him to distract him, but they had brought with them only a few books from Edinburgh. So one evening, when she saw signs of his restless frustration as he tried to speak, she picked up the bible and searched through its pages for a reading. But David Fletcher moaned, gesturing with his hand that she should set it aside, shaking his head and pointed to another volume, a small book of poetry. His body shook with the effort. Then he coughed and suddenly spoke clearly and distinctly, in his own voice.

'No, lassie. I want no scripture in my ear.'

Isobel kissed him, laughing with joy, even at this blasphemy, for it surely signalled his recovery. 'Say it again, father, again, I beg of you. Say whatever you wish. Even mother won't mind such wicked talk.'

Jean Fletcher ran to his side and embraced her husband. 'God is merciful indeed,' she said, her face alight with pleasure and relief, 'and forgiving too.'

'Yes, and there is mystery in His mercy too,' said Isobel, almost to herself. Though her heart was lifted by this rallying of her father's, when she looked at him weakened and afflicted, Isobel knew the truth, that her father would never work again. What the future would be for them, she hardly dared to think.

Nicolas Payne's workshop was in darkness, the shutters open, but no candles lit when Isobel entered, more than a week after her father had been struck down. The two journeymen were at their benches while Joe, the apprentice swished carelessly at the floor with the broom. They looked up at she entered.

'There's news today,' said Master Ruddock, looking more gloomy than usual. 'Mistress Payne has passed away.' He bowed his head again to his work.

'God rest her soul,' said Isobel and the others muttered quiet 'amens'.

'Burying her today,' said Joe helpfully, his broom poised in the air.

Isobel said nothing more, for she had never set eyes upon the unfortunate Mistress Payne. She hoped that the woman's time with her husband had held some pleasure and love. She wondered also whether the wife had knowledge of her husband's lustful and inconstant nature.

The day passed calmly enough without the presence of either Master Payne or his son Francis and Isobel was pleased for the chance to withdraw into her own thoughts as she worked. She was struck by a wave of homesickness for the city of Edinburgh and thought of John, recalling the times they had gone together through the streets. So engaged in talk, they had noticed nothing else but each other. Would she were back there now, before those terrible times, the death of Thomas and all its aftermath.

She tried to shake herself from this futile reverie, these foolish regrets and turned her mind instead to the future, the comfort of imagining what might come to pass, if only fortune would look kindly on them. Her father would recover, John would secure another post. Nicolas Payne would give her the finishing work which she so loved and a rise in wages so that she could save enough to take them all back to Scotland. She and John would be joined as man and wife. She smiled at this, thinking it just as much folly as her longing for times

past. What a ridiculous creature she was to conjure such fancies when none knew her destiny but God. Imagining these foolish things was as like to bring them to pass as dropping a bawbee in a wishing well: useless, vain and sinful. She was so engrossed in her daydreams, however, that she started to hear the voice of Nicolas Payne close by her.

He and his son stood in the doorway of the workshop, both clad in black, though the Master bookbinder wore lace at the throat and a fine feathered hat. His son, squat and plump at his side, was clad in black silk breeches too tight for his thighs. Isobel rose from her stool.

‘Master Payne, I’m sorry to hear of your loss. May God comfort you at this time.’

Nicolas Payne nodded, pursing his lips and taking a step towards her. ‘Thank you for your kind words,’ he said in a tone of affected dullness.

Isobel saw Francis Payne’s face, his mouth curled up at the corners in a smirk, even on this occasion. Not wishing for any further conversation, Isobel resumed her seat and turned again to her work.

‘She was a poor, sick soul, a frail woman, a weak woman,’ said her employer.

Isobel heard Nicolas Payne’s voice coming closer. ‘She was not as a true wife should be, no not for many years,’ he said almost as if to himself, but he was beside her now so that she caught the wheeze of his breathing.

‘I hope that her suffering was not too great,’ said Isobel quietly, glancing at him and seeing his eyes upon her. His look was hardly that of a man in mourning for his wife. He stood for a moment in silence and Isobel kept her eyes trained on her work. She heard him sigh heavily.

‘Well, good evening. Tomorrow I begin my solitary life as a widower,’ he said.

Isobel did not look up to see them go, but held her breath until she heard the door close. Now she heaved a sigh to have them gone. If only the normally reticent journeyman Master Ruddock had not made his parting remark, her day would have finished passably well. He came near to her bench on his way out of the shop, looking at her with his mournful eyes. ‘Take care, lass. Take care,’ he said.

Isobel ran home again, eager to clear the anguish from her brain by distancing herself from the workshop, keen to see her father again, hoping to find him even more recovered. She was pleased to discover him in a chair by the fire and her mother cutting onions for supper.

‘Father, how are you faring?’ said Isobel, noting a greater animation in his eyes.

‘Lassie,’ he said, ‘you’re fair glowing. Have ye been running all the way home?’

Isobel laughed and kissed him. ‘Aye, father,’ she said, ‘and was it not worth the hurry?’

She then caught sight of a letter on the table lying by the peeled onions. Jean Fletcher turned and met Isobel’s eye.

‘Aye, it’s for you,’ she said, through pursed lips, though her voice carried no rebuke this time. But if it had, her mother’s displeasure was a small price to pay for the letter Isobel so desired. Her father’s recovery seemed to have dispelled at least some of her mother’s anger at her correspondence with John. She took up the letter and plunged it into her pocket, relishing the thought of its content and her later pleasure in reading it alone. Could it contain news of his visit to Cambridge, she wondered. She hardly dared to hope.

Their supper that night was not as dismal than of late and Isobel found her spirits lifted, though Jean Fletcher’s face still wore the furrows of anxiety. As David Fletcher dozed, Jean whispered to Isobel in the corner of the small, cluttered room which had become their home.

‘Isobel, your father will never work again. That we should have come to this near breaks my heart.’

‘Mother, don’t fret. I have a wage and employment safe as any man’s and you have your needlework. We’ll not starve. Come let’s be grateful, for we’re more fortunate than many.’

‘Aye, Isobel, you’re a good lass and a dutiful daughter to us. But here you are toiling your young life all away. You should be married to a good man and have bairns of your own. You’ve surely no hope of that minister’s son. You must look mayhap for an Englishman.’

‘Mother, you’d have me seek out any fellow that’s willing?’ said Isobel, irked by her mother’s comments.

‘No, lassie, but –. Well, you can’t be a bookbinder for ever. You need–’

‘Why not?’ said Isobel getting up quickly and throwing down the sock she was knitting. ‘You know nothing of what I need and want–. I’m going to bed.’ The shrillness of her voice caused her father to stir.

‘Wheesht and get you gone,’ said her mother crossly.

Isobel withdrew to the small chamber, glad to escape to solitude at last, but her anticipation of the pleasure of reading John’s letter felt soured by her pettish exchange with her mother. John’s words would restore her, she knew. She took the letter from her pocket, noting that the writing seemed more irregular and rougher than his usual immaculate hand.

Edinburgh, 6<sup>th</sup> June

*My Dearest Isobel,*

*Forgive this hasty note, whose brevity is born of necessity and not from any lessening of my love and longing for you. I am forced to remove myself from my position as schoolmaster at Colinton parish for reasons too long and distressing to convey to you here. I will relate to you the sorry tale in my next letter. As I find myself again in the city of Edinburgh, I beg you to write to me care of the White Horse Inn, Canongate, as I would not for my life miss a communication from you.*

*Now that I am without means, until I can secure another post, I cannot come to you soon as I had hoped. Isobel, will we ever meet again? I pray for it daily and for the strength to keep my promise to you. God bless you and keep you.*

*John*

Shocked with disappointment and worry for John, she wondered what possible misfortune could have struck to make him leave his post. How foolishly they had hoped and desired, in the heat of their love, that fortune would be kind to them. At every turn was an obstacle, and every event a force which drove them apart. If only they could be together they could face whatever trials were visited upon them. But she was mad even to imagine the impossible. She found paper and ink and took the only action which lay in her power.

*Peas Hill, Cambridge*

*Dearest John,*

*I am so sorry to hear of your changed situation, but trust fully in your talents and abilities to lead you to another post. Do not despair, I beg of you. Our love is stronger than the pains which fall upon us.....*

The next day Isobel arrived at the workshop to find a large pile of leaves for stitching, a new commission for one of the college libraries.

‘Keep you busy today, that will,’ said the journeyman.

‘But am I not always busy, Master Ruddock?’ said Isobel with a lightness meant to challenge him, for he was a dour soul of a steadily unmovable humour.

Remarkably, his mouth flickered slightly into a smile and he scratched his head as though touched with embarrassment. ‘Well, ‘tis true, I’ve not seen a worker such as you afore,’ he mumbled and went to his bench at the other side of the workshop.

‘Especially not a woman, Master Ruddock,’ she called over to him, unable to resist the comment, which provoked another half-concealed smile from the journeyman.

The afternoon had almost gone, but Isobel still had much to do. She had to wait to remove a book from the lying press for she knew it was an urgent job which could not be left until the next day. The light was fading as clouds gathered, blotting out the sun in readiness for a storm. The air was heavy with the threat of it.

‘You’re not meaning to stay on here? ‘Tis late,’ said Master Ruddock as he made ready to depart, the others having left some time ago.

‘I have some unfinished work, Master Ruddock,’ said Isobel. ‘I would rather stay and see an end to it, for there will be more tomorrow, no doubt.’

‘You shame me, young Mistress, with your love of labour,’ said the journeyman. ‘But listen, the weather turns foul. I’ll stay and help, to get it done with more speed.’

Isobel was touched by his offer, though she could tell that he hoped she would not accept and heard the rising howl of the wind outside.

‘Thank you, Master Ruddock. You are very kind. But there’s really no need. I’m used to these labours, for in our workshop in Edinburgh I would sometimes carry on well into the night.’

He nodded and sighing, put on his hat and left Isobel alone in the workshop. She would be here for some time, completing these volumes but at least she might let the rain pass before her return home. The wind blew an outside shutter hard against the wall of the building with a sharp crack. Another blast pummelled the window and the first drops of rain splashed on to the glass. She did not look up at the next clatter of a door banging. It was not until Nicolas Payne was standing at her side that she realised that the last sound had been the opening and shutting of the door and that her employer had entered.

‘What dedication,’ he announced and Isobel started with the shock of seeing him. ‘Mistress Fletcher, you impress me greatly,’ he said with a smile embedded in his cheeks.

‘It is my duty and my work. I have a pride in it,’ she said, inwardly bewailing her conscientious spirit and heartily wishing she had left the work unfinished.

‘I don’t mean your work, you foolish girl,’ he said coming closer.

Isobel was struck with shock at this sudden appearance and the threatening familiarity in his manner. His wife’s death and business matters had kept him away for some days so that her dread of him, even in that short time, had seem to diminish. Now here he was again, triumphing it seemed, in finding her alone. Fear crept over her and her skin prickled as he spoke.

‘Can’t you see, you tempting little minx, how I adore you? Don’t you see what you have made me?’

‘Master Payne, I’ve never given you cause to... never meant....’ she stuttered, shrinking from him.

‘No, don’t be so modest. Come here to me. Let me look at you,’ he persisted and the next she knew he had clutched and imprisoned her wrist in his grip.

She pulled against him, twisting her hand, feeling anger rise in her now to join her fear.

‘Master Payne, let me go, I pray you, let me go.’

He released her, seeing that she was in earnest and stood back from her, bowing his head in mock shame, which turned Isobel’s fear to fury.

‘You have no right to treat me as though I were yours for the taking, a thing which you can use at will,’ she said as steadily as she could. As soon as the words were out she regretted them, for his face darkened and his brow creased in anger. He was her employer and held her livelihood in his hands.

But to her surprise, the frown dropped from his face as quickly as it had appeared and he shook his head.

‘Pardon me, Isobel, may I call you by your lovely name? I cannot help my feelings. I find myself transported by your beauty. Just the look of you here each day is driving me to distraction.’

‘Master Payne,’ she said relenting a little, thinking that perhaps his fault was only lack of control. ‘It is not proper to speak to me like this. You have only just buried your poor wife.’ She felt a small measure of power return, but her wrist where he had held her still smarted and stung with pain.

He bowed his head and suddenly sat down on a stool by the bench, his back rounded, his face in his hands. He seemed to her for a moment like a sulky child reprimanded for a misdemeanour. But then he looked up at her again, his eyes dark and determined.

‘Isobel,’ he resumed in a slow and deliberate tone, ‘I’m in torment because of you. I cannot declare it in any other way. Will you be my wife?’

Isobel’s mind ran frantically to find a response. The pause, though brief gave her some chance to form it before she spoke. ‘Master Payne, I am much flattered that you should consider me a suitable partner, but I fear that I must decline.’

‘For what reason?’ he spluttered, rising from the stool, his plump cheeks quivering, his colour rising.

‘I have to tell you, Master Payne, that there is someone else who has won my affection.’

‘And where is he? Who is he?’ He leapt to his feet and advanced on her. ‘Some wild Scotchman, I suppose. If so, he’s far from here.’

His mouth formed itself into a snarl. Isobel was struck then by her own simplicity in believing his feigned modesty and repentance. Another gust of wind banged the shutter outside again and Nicolas Payne swore under his breath.

‘Are you betrothed to this fellow?’

Isobel could make no reply.

‘Are you? Tell me. Are you bound in a contract with this man?’

‘We are joined by bonds much stronger than those of the law, by love and respect for each other.’

‘Damn him! Damn his soul!’ he cried, ‘No man can feel love as I do. Where is he now, this fellow, he that you are bound to, eh? Why does he not care for you, as I would?’

Isobel had to escape and there was only pleading left to her. ‘Master Payne. I must go home. Please sir, let me go, I beg of you.’

‘Nonsense, you cannot go out in this storm,’ he retorted, his voice dull with spent rage. ‘Sit, Isobel. Let us talk. You must hear me.’

This command seemed less violent and more of an entreaty for her to remain. So she sat still, but at a distance from him, to evade his heavy presence, to avoid his breath, to be out of the reach of his hands.

‘Isobel, consider my offer carefully, like the sensible girl I know you to be. I offer you a comfortable life. I am a prosperous man as you know and Master of the Guild. I am much respected in this city. I could give you and your poor parents a life free from worry, a life of comfort. Think, just think of your poor father and mother. Your father is unfit to earn his own bread. But I am more than happy to provide for you all, I swear it. All worries will be lifted from you. And for myself I will love you and cherish you. Think, Isobel what I offer.’

Isobel looked at his face, searching there for a mark of sincerity, for a sign of something that she could admire or respect and found only a shifting of the eyes, a flitting attention to her, a feigned frown of concern. She could say nothing to him, but bent her head to avoid his gaze, aware of a sickening realisation that what he offered was more than many women could ever dream of. What folly and wickedness was it in her not to entertain such a marriage, to save her parents, to secure her future?

He seemed to take her silence as a sign of compliance and rising, came to her, kneeling down at her feet and reaching for her hand. She did not repulse him this time, as the exhaustion of the evening's events had drained from her the force to resist. He raised her hand to his lips which were parted, their sticky moistness causing her to wince.

'No, I cannot,' she said quietly. 'Master Payne...'

'Isobel, take care,' he replied, with something of a warning creeping into his voice, though he spoke almost in a whisper. 'We will speak no more of it tonight. I see that you are uneasy and tired from your toil and your womanly cares. Just consider well before you give your answer. Think deeply of what suffering your refusal may bring.'

## Chapter 21

June - Colinton

‘I put to you that this man before us is not fit to guide the young, to show them the way to godliness. Rather, he would pollute their minds with the filth of his own sinful nature.’

The Reverend Wyllie, seated at the end of the long table in the session chamber of the manse, addressed the line of stern-faced elders. John, standing before them, felt his courage shrink as it had so often in the past, under the gaze of his father’s blame. John’s strongest ally in the Kirk Session lay newly dead in his coffin in the parlour of the manse. Raw grief added to John’s despair at this accusation and its likely outcome. There remained only the voices of poor cottars and their children to speak for him, and those gathered in the room that day looked cowed and uncertain, listening in silence as he was denounced by his own father.

‘John Wyllie,’ said a thin-faced elder, whom John recognised as a hay merchant from a farm at the border of the parish, ‘you are brought here to answer charges of lewdness and debauchery with this woman.’ The man pointed to Susan where she sat head bowed, on a stool beside her mistress. ‘This is a sorrowful state,’ he continued, ‘for we in this parish believed you to be of good character and dedicated to God and to your work.’

There was a sudden crack of a stool as it overtoppled as Susan jumped to her feet.

‘There ain’t no better walks the earth than he,’ she cried. ‘He couldn’t do no wrong —’

‘Woman, sit down and keep your silence, else we will remove you from this place,’ said the thin-faced man.

John glanced round and saw Mistress Paterson reach for Susan’s arm and whisper to her. She obeyed, sinking down on to her stool, burying her face in her apron. Susan’s loyalty and courage struck him profoundly. She had stood up bravely in this place, wrongly accused and disgraced, but thinking only of him. His gratitude to her choked him, but he knew that this outburst would only serve to incriminate them further. There were murmurings among those assembled, at the back of the chamber. The Jamiesons were there, all of them, even the babes with Mary holding one, and staring white-faced at John. He saw others too, a widow

from the cottage beside the mill, two cottars, neighbours to the Jamiesons and their wives, the miller and his son, the baker and his aged mother.

Standing there, John breathed deeply, remembering Susan's words to him the day before, feeling something of the power of her courage. 'Stand strong against him, sir.'

'Sirs, and all assembled here,' he said, forcing his gaze upon his father first, before glancing around the whole company. 'I have done no wrong, nor am I guilty of these charges. No more is that good woman yonder. It is true, we met by chance in the Dell and conversed as friends might do, no more. I am falsely charged, on evidence based merely on an intent to root out evil, which finds in innocent events the very sin it seeks.'

'Bewitched! He is bewitched,' said the Reverend Wyllie, in a tone of threatening conviction. 'That woman, she with the Devil's mark upon her, has cast her evil eye on him. How else could it come about that a son brought up in the fear of God could stray?'

John felt his face flush, not with shame but with anger. 'No,' he cried, appalled at his father's tactics. 'There is no witchery here.'

'Do you deny that you touched this woman, that you laid hands upon her? Do you deny that you embraced her? Do you question my testimony as a man of God?' said his father.

John hesitated, seeing that Susan wept quietly now. 'No, I do not deny that I took her hand. She was in distress and I sought to comfort her, that's all. There was no embrace, no improper act.'

The Reverend Wyllie pounded his fist on the table, drawing the looks of all to him. The thin-faced elder's mouth twitched and he looked directly at the company assembled.

'Is there any here will speak for this man's character?'

John saw Mistress Jamieson nudge her husband and Alexander Jamieson took a step towards the bench, his bonnet clutched in his hand.

'The young Maister took in our bairn Willie tae the school, God rest his soul,' said Alexander Jamieson. 'He showed his gifts tae all. The bairns were right well schooled by him. The woman too, aye, she came to the schoolhouse like a bairn herself.'

'That's no natural,' muttered the widow, the neighbour of the miller, from the other side of the room. Two men beside her nodded. Then one, the baker, a red-haired stocky man raised his hand and stepped forward to speak.

'Some say it was the woman's witchery gave the bairn his powers,' he said. 'Mayhap she laid her eye on the young Maister too, to entice him, for what man would look upon her else?'

‘Aye, now you see the woman for what she is,’ said the Reverend Wyllie, his voice triumphant, his eyes alight.

‘What evidence is this?’ John said as steadily as he could, feeling his fury rise. ‘This is no more than superstition, conjecture, not proof of magic. Outward blemishes do not signify impurity of mind or devilry. This woman’s heart—’

‘Lewdness, filth! You speak of women’s hearts,’ said his father, his face contorted with disgust. ‘Look, look on him. He speaks of outward show, he with his well-favoured face. His professions of innocence are all the more wicked for they conceal the deepest profanity within.’

‘Enough, Minister,’ declared the thin-faced elder. ‘We must calm our passions and seek guidance from God. We will deliberate and consider the decision of this Kirk Session.’

The Reverend Wyllie sat back, suddenly quiet, head bowed and hands clasped as if in prayer.

‘Pardon my outburst, Masters. I am moved by the sight of my own flesh and blood dishonouring me, a minister of God, and in his dissembling which makes fools of us all.’

The elders drew closer together for some moments while John, shaking his head with no hope remaining now of any fair outcome, his anger festering at the futility of his defence. He dared not look at Susan, nor at any others in the assembly, but he heard murmurs and the whisperings of women behind him.

The elders raised their heads from their low-voiced conversation, then sat back in their seats, their eyes all trained on John.

‘John Wyllie,’ said the thin-faced man, ‘you have, on the word of the Minister and by your own confession, sullied your position here by unwise and lewd associations with a woman of ill-repute. Whether this be by the Devil’s means, working through his agent, this woman here, or by your own sinful lust, you are not fit to lead ignorant children on the path to God. It is the decision of the Kirk Session to dismiss you from your post as schoolmaster. You must quit this parish and do penance for your sins. The woman, Susan, must take her place on the stool of repentance each sabbath for six months and pledge herself to a pure and godly life, swearing before God to relinquish all her dealings with the Devil.’

The rain started falling when John was only half a mile from the village along the roadway to Edinburgh, only a few hours after the Kirk Session had finished. A blustery wind threw stinging drops into his face. He pulled his cloak around him and adjusted the small, hastily gathered bundle of his possessions. His mind was still charged with anger which burned like

a pain at his father's vindictive defamation of him and of Susan, and the thought of her punishment. What kind of justice discovered imaginary evils to indulge the pleasure of their punishment? What kind of church extolled such acts by its ministers? That same church which had murdered Thomas Aikenhead and sent Isobel and her parents fleeing from hatred bred of bigotry dressed as godliness. He could not stay in this country. Others had escaped and he would do so now. He was clear in his resolution but it was tainted with regret at what had been taken from him and at his failure and impotence to prevent it. He leaned against the wind and plodded along the miry path, hearing a faint call behind him.

'Maister Wyllie,' came the cry and he turned to see a figure running after him. It was Mary Jamieson, grasping her shawl around her head against the rain, plunging along, splashing through the mud in her haste.

He took a few quick paces back down the roadway towards her, and seeing some shelter beneath the branches of a generous elm tree, beckoned to her to come to him. Her face was flushed, smeared with wetness and her breath came fast.

'Sir, please—,' she cried 'Please dinnae leave us.'

'Mary, I must,' he said, moved by her loyalty. John had been allowed no farewells to any of those he longed to speak to after the Kirk Session was over. Nor was he permitted to stay for the burial of his old friend and mentor the Reverend Wallace. His father had ordered all the parishioners to quit the place immediately and forbade anyone from interfering with John's speedy departure.

'But, I'll have naeboddy —,' she said sobbing now. 'I dinnae believe the things they said and neither do Ma and Da. It's fear o' the Minister and the Kirk Session made others talk of witchery.'

'Mary, please don't weep on my behalf,' said John, 'it heartens me more than I can say, to know that you believe me and think no ill of me, or of Susan.'

'Sir, there's no other like you,' said Mary, looking at him and sniffing to suppress her sobs.

John, knowing how he might console her, reached into his bundle and pulled out his copy of a translation of Virgil's 'Aeneid' and a small psalter.

'Mary take these, with my blessing. Do not give up your learning. Stay true to your ambition. You're an excellent scholar with a quick and gifted mind. May you use that mind for your own enrichment and for the good of others. God bless you and keep you.'

She took the books from him, her eyes bright with gratitude through her tears, bundling them quickly inside her plaid against the rain.

‘I willnae forget you Maister Wyllie, ever,’ she said.

‘Nor I you, Mary,’ he said and turning his face to the wind once more resumed his journey.

Soaked and exhausted, John reached the city which today offered a respite from his immediate trials, but which seemed to him a very citadel of hate and suspicion, where a free life could not be lived. At that moment, he resolved to travel to England, to find work of any honest sort, to forsake his native land and go to Isobel as soon as his condition would allow. He would have to write to her immediately and though his head throbbed with pain, he forced himself to walk the extra distance to the White Horse Inn in Canongate, fearing that his sudden removal from Colinton would result in missing a letter from her. He wrote a hasty note and paying more money than he could afford, begged that his letter be taken by the next carrier.

He toiled back up the hill, with aching limbs, shivering though the day was not cold, his damp garments clinging to him. He knew he must find lodgings or fall down in the street in his sickness, so he headed for the Cowgate in search of a cheap room to conserve his limited funds. He found a room high on the fifth floor of a tenement building, rented to him by a drunken woman who showed an over-friendly concern for his welfare.

‘Aye, young Maister, you’re a wee bit peaky and aguish to my eyes,’ said the woman leering at him, ‘else I’d come closer tae ye. Don’t you go dying in my hoose. I’ll have your money first. That’ll be eighteen shillins’, or twenty if ye ha need o’ a candle.’

His face on fire, he collapsed on the hard bed in the garret room and knew no more until he thought himself awake some hours later, struggling for breath. A rope strangled his throat, tightened round it and he fell, until he felt his brain about to burst out of his head. Isobel stood below him, with a hand outstretched towards him, but he could not reach her, no matter how he tried. Someone hammered on his door and screamed at him, ‘Wyllie, what’s afoot?’ Where was Susan, for surely she would come to him, as she had before. ‘Fornicator, to consort with a low creature!’ bellowed his father in his ear. ‘Honour thy father and thy mother.’

John was not sure how long he had raved in that room, but when he was conscious again of his surroundings, found himself with a terrible thirst and reached for a jug by the bed. He pulled himself upright and poured the contents of the jug down his throat to slake his thirst and with the sleeve of his shirt wiped the sour sweat from his face. For the rest of the day he lay there, hearing the sounds from the street below, surveying the grey walls of the filthy room, hoping that soon he would have the strength to rise.

‘Master Wyllie?’ came a woman’s voice at the door.

‘Aye, Mistress?’ he said.

‘Thank the lord,’ she said, opening the door. He recognized the drunken landlady, though today she seemed the embodiment of concerned responsibility.

‘I thought you’d breathed yer last, young Maister,’ she said, taking a step into the room. ‘Tis good to see ye wi’ some life about ye. Will ye tak something to sup?’

‘Thank you for your care, Mistress. I feel better now, though I may lie here awhile to gather my strength a little. What day is it?’

When she told him, he realised that more than four days had passed since his flight from Colinton. He felt the urgency of rousing himself and with the aid of some gruel from the landlady and a wash, he was ready to venture out into the city. After the short walk to the High Street he felt exhausted and took refuge in Mistress Purdie’s Coffee house, a busy and popular place for those who wished to keep abreast of the city’s affairs. Here, he found his thoughts clearing and recalled his deliberations about the course he should take. The coffee shop had some London newspapers and John scanned them with care, hoping that they might carry advertisements for any posts of suitable employment. He would have to find some paid occupation, if he were ever to hope of offering himself as a suitor to Isobel. He knew that the gentry often employed tutors for their children and that he was both capable and qualified for such a position, but he had no connections with anyone, particularly in England, who might throw such opportunities his way. For a moment he felt a mood of despondency descend.

But then he thought of Isobel and pulled from an inside pocket of his coat the folded paper. It was Isobel’s first letter to him and his most precious. He kept it close to his heart at all times. Carefully unfolding the creased paper, as he had done so many times before when moments of desolation overtook him, he found the passage which moved him most of all.

*.....You thought me bold when we first met, I know for I saw it in your disapproving look, though you, always modest and gentlemanly, endeavoured to hide it from me. But now I can be bolder in black ink, for you cannot see my blushes. John, I love you and have done since first we met, even in the midst of my curses when I reviled and spurned you from the depths of my grief and bitterness. Your verse has humbled me and at the same time re-kindled my love that, were I free, there is nowhere in this world where I would care to be but with you.....*

She was his source of hope for the future. She had seen him as a weakling against his father, suffered his puritanical judgements against herself and Thomas and still she loved him. He knew that he could rise from this his latest failure, with the strength of her love. He

would find a way, whatever it took, to earn his bread and take her as his wife. His mind drifted into a daydream of walking with her along the riverside in that English city which she had described in her letters. He rehearsed how he would go to David Fletcher and ask for his daughter's hand, begging forgiveness for his part in Thomas's death, declaring his devotion to Isobel, laying himself, his means and his prospects though modest, at their disposal.

He rose, filled with the mental energy of his decision, exasperated that his body could not yet respond to this sense of purpose. He would purchase a place on a coach to London where he had heard a good education might earn a man a living. He had heard also of many of his countrymen who had gone south in search of greater prospects of employment. Cambridge was not very far from London and he would write to Isobel from there

Impatient though he was to depart, now that his course of action was clear, he knew that he needed a little more time for recuperation, as his legs could hardly bear his weight after his illness. Leaving Mistress Purdie's coffee house, he turned to go down the High Street, intending to proceed to the White Horse Inn to enquire about coaches to London, but his head began to swim, so that he had to grasp the railings of a stairway to save himself from collapsing in the street. While standing there, head bowed hoping to regain his balance, he imagined he heard someone calling his name and next felt a hand upon his arm.

'John Wyllie, good day to you, man. Where have you been these many months?'

John looked into the face of Allen Ferguson, the amiable cousin of Mungo Craig. He offered his hand to Allen, with genuine gladness to see his former associate and friend, and one who had spoken for Thomas Aikenhead after his arrest.

'But I see you're not well,' said Allen Ferguson, concerned and grasping him in a firm handshake.

'I am a little weak from an ague which has afflicted me this last week,' said John, telling Allen briefly of his situation and the location of his lodgings.

'You must stay no more nights in that hole. I have rooms just nearby in Warriston Close. Come, spend a few days with me to get yourself back on your feet.'

John was pleased to find himself at ease in Allen's modest but comfortable quarters and enjoying a good dinner of herring, the first meal he had eaten for many days.

'I'm glad to have renewed our acquaintance, John,' said Allen Ferguson after they had dined, 'for when we last had occasion to meet, it was hardly a happy time.'

'Aye,' said John. 'It haunts me daily. The weight of guilt grows less I suppose, but I can never be free of it, nor should I be.'

‘But John, we were all complicit in our own way, were we not? Should not we have taken Thomas away from such a public place when he was in a mood to rant? Did we not encourage his daring, mischievous tongue for our own amusement? You only it was had the courage to declare your beliefs, while the rest of us went along with him and then turned traitor when he was taken.’

‘And what of Mungo Craig?’ asked John.

‘He has quit Edinburgh for Aberdeen, so I believe. None would keep company with him, after his deposition became public and when Thomas was sentenced. His treachery condemned him in the end and his kin have spurned him along with his friends, even those who did not approve of Thomas.’

‘Well, I’m glad at least that he did not prosper, for all his scheming and duplicity,’ said John.

‘Aye, the hanging was a matter of shame and disgrace to Scotland and to us all,’ said Allen shaking his head. ‘There’s many abroad think us barbarians. Sometimes, I think they’re right.’ He paused to mark a shift in his thinking. ‘But come, let’s talk of happier affairs. Tell me of your plans. You’re going down south? I wonder if there’ll be any of our countrymen left, with all these departing on the expedition overseas.’

Two days in the pleasant company of Allen Ferguson did something to restore John’s strength, though his mind flitted impatiently upon his intention to travel to London. He had confided in Allen who was an easy and affable companion about the causes behind his leaving the country and of his hopes for Isobel.

‘I cannot thank you enough,’ said John shaking his friend by the hand as he made ready to leave.

‘No need, no need,’ Allen replied, with a smile. ‘All I ask, John, is that I may dance at your wedding.’

John embraced him, grateful for his happy optimism and made his way down the stairs to the street, feeling renewed hope strengthening his step. He then descended the hill to the White Horse Inn at Canongate, where the coach for London was making ready to depart. He stepped inside to wait, as two of the horses were lame and others were being fetched. The inn yard was milling with people and the rooms inside full of other waiting travellers, alive also with ale-fuelled talk. John stood by the doorway with a view of the inn yard and caught the gist of the excitement of the conversations nearby, the imminent departure of the expeditionary fleet to found the colony at Darien. Two boisterous individuals, one in the

uniform of a soldier, his companion in the well-worn coat of a clerk or secretary, squeezed themselves and their jugs of ale beside John.

‘Aye, it’s a fortune I’ll make in the land of Hottentots,’ the soldier laughed, ‘for I’ve signed myself up this day.’

‘Well, I’ll not waste another minute myself,’ said his companion, gulping the drink from his cup. ‘For this country’s gone to the dogs.’

‘Aye, there’s many as thinks that too,’ replied the soldier.

‘Land free for the taking,’ said the other, ‘Just think, we’ll be lairds. When do the ships depart?’

‘They’re anchored at Leith, at least a good part of them, so I’ve heard. There’s some folks aboard already and waiting. So, make haste, my friend for they may go without ye.’

The second man drained his cup, tipping his head back and smacking his lips. ‘I’ll be on my way to Mylnes Court to sign up then,’ he said. ‘Fare you weel, till I see ye this evening.’ He rose unsteadily and pushed past John out of the doorway.

‘Aye, fareweel Robbie,’ said the soldier nodding and catching John’s eye.

‘You’re no going yersel to the colony, young Maister?’ he enquired.

‘No sir, though I’ve heard much talk of it,’ John replied.

‘Well, let me tell ye, it’s a chance to make a new life for yersel, if you’ve a liking for adventure. You look like a man o’ some education,’ he added. ‘There’s places for all ranks of men, so I hear. It’s to be a new country, this land of Darien, a commonwealth where a man can get land and prosper. There’ll be no more famines, no one dying for want o’ a crust.’

‘Aye,’ said John, ‘I hanker after a new life myself, but I’m travelling south, to London.’

‘What? To England?’ the man cried with a grimace. ‘You’d be a traitor to your own country? The English are all puffed up wi’ their colonies and their merchant ships to the Indies. We’ll match them, naw we’ll outdo them, for there’s a fine fleet assembling and the whole city’s fu’ with preparing for it. The ships are all fu’ up to the gunwales with goods to sell, cloth, whisky, bibles and trinkets galore, for there’s business to do. We’ll beat the English at their own game. Take my advice, young Maister, come awa’ wi’ us.’

John was not keen to prolong the conversation with the man and managed to slip away from him into the yard, for he had seen a rider with a satchel across his back enter on a horse glistening from a rapid ride. John watched him dismount. It was the post carrier. John approached him quickly and enquired about whether he brought letters from England.

‘Haud on, haud on, Maister,’ said the man, ‘I’ve just come frae Dunbar this morning. Aye there’s some frae the south.’

He pulled out a bundle of letters and fumbled through the folded papers, mouthing each name he found written on the front.

‘Whit name dae ye go by?’ he asked squinting at John. ‘Aye, here we are. Yer in luck. There’s two.’

John’s heart pounded as he took the two letters in exchange for a coin and withdrew to a corner of the yard, oblivious now to the pressing crowds around him. He broke open both seals and looked at the dates, wondering why Isobel had written two in such close succession. One letter was dated less than a week ago.

*Peas Hill, Cambridge, 18<sup>th</sup> June*

*Dear John,*

*I pray with all my heart that this letter finds you well. John, I can hardly write this, for it pains me so greatly, knowing that there can be no other letter after this.*

*I have related to you something of our early good fortune in this city of Cambridge and then my poor father’s illness. Though he is now much recovered, he will never be able to work again, which grieves him greatly and taxes us, for my earnings are too meagre to keep us all.*

*My employer, Master Nicolas Payne, has offered us the only means of relief from our plight. This, I have determined, is the only course to take, for all our sakes. I cannot see my poor parents end their days in the penury of the poor house. Master Payne who is recently widowed has offered himself to me as a husband. I repelled his advances at the start, as my heart and all my tender thoughts were pledged only to you.*

*Master Payne, who is a prosperous man, has promised me that if I become his wife, my parents will be safe in his care and that he will secure their welfare for the rest of their lives. I believe that he is sincere in his intentions of generosity to my parents and in his regard for me. I may in time be able to esteem his qualities.*

*I must only rebuke myself for my foolishness in imagining that I could be mistress of my own life and that I might have been granted the power to choose a husband on the grounds of mutual respect and love. I once had a dream of sharing my life with you, but now I have awakened to see the truth in daylight, that women are not blessed with the freedom to follow their hearts. So I have little right to expect anything so fanciful. I am fortunate that*

*there is someone willing to provide so generously for me and my parents and to afford me comforts that many in this world would crave.*

*So John, I beg your forgiveness a thousand times for this betrayal of your love which wounds me more than you will ever know. This letter bids you farewell forever, for I know my duty and must embrace my chosen course. You too must start anew and seek elsewhere a woman who will give you the happiness which is your due.*

*May God bless and keep you.*

*Adieu*

*Isobel*