

Chapter 25

September 1697 En route and Darien

‘What is that island yonder?’ asked John of the lieutenant, James Munro, with whom he had struck up an acquaintance. Ahead, to the starboard bow, marooned in the expanse of blue, lay a piece of land, clothed in dark green forest.

‘It’s the Island of Dezeada,’ said the officer, ‘The Land of Desire, named so by Columbus as the first land he saw after crossing this ocean.’

‘But what of us?’ said John. ‘How far are we from our land of desire?’

Some of the other landsmen, lying or sitting, inert on the deck, stirred a little at the talk and looked up at those who stood at the rail staring at the island. A hot breeze offered no relief from the languor which weighted the air. Calum Colquhoun was slumped with his back against a coil of rope nearby and Matthew Simpson leaned over the rail, peering at the island through his telescope.

Lieutenant Munro, a courteous officer of the grenadiers was around thirty years of age, though his face was that of an older man, bearing witness to the outward and inward wounds of soldiery. He was one of the few who would deign to spend time in the company of the lower ranks of men on board. He and John had discovered shared tastes in literature and the officer and Calum Colquhoun would engage in arguments and reminiscences of battles and engagements in King William’s wars.

‘Well, by the Captain’s reckoning,’ said Lieutenant Munro, ‘the Gulf of Darien should be no more than two weeks of sailing with a fair wind. But it seems there is only one man who has knowledge of these Caribbean waters, William Paterson, who travels on the *Unicorn*’

‘William Paterson?’ said John, ‘the originator of the scheme, I believe.’

‘God damn him tae Hell for it,’ muttered one of the landsmen nearby.

‘Aye,’ said the officer, ‘there are others would damn all our leaders, for the quarrelling stubbornness of them.’

John was surprised at his companion’s remarks which struck him as close to treasonous insubordination. James Munro seemed a conscientious officer bound much by his duty, but with compassion for the sufferings of his fellows. In this company, John reflected, the officer’s judgements on his superiors were unlikely to be condemned. There were few of the humble landsmen who spoke favourably of their masters, commanders or lairds.

The mention of William Paterson turned John's thoughts to the man's wife and the faithful Susan. John knew that wherever Mistress Paterson was, Susan would be. That strong woman, indispensable to her mistress in the Colinton days, would surely now be more so, as they endured the privations and discomforts of the journey. John's mind was troubled too by the memory of their parting, his humiliation and the punishment imposed upon Susan by the Kirk Session. Perhaps when they reached their destination, God willing, he would meet Susan and Mistress Paterson in a different world, one where people could live by the rules of their own good consciences and not in fear of castigation by the Kirk. But for the moment, they must find the land which was to be their new world.

The lieutenant continued on his theme of the shortcomings of the leadership. 'If our illustrious leaders can agree on a plan of action, then perhaps he can get us there in good speed. I'm weary of the sea and maggots in my meal.'

'And I'll eat ma ain flesh,' muttered Davie McBride, gripping the loose belt round his waist. 'I've a hunger on me as'll drive me tae madness. There's no even a bird in sight.'

Up on the foretop high above, one of the sailor apprentices drooped over, a sling hanging loose in his hand. The boy had had some little success in bringing down a few seabirds, white gulls which has come floating and swooping alongside the ship. Some had relished the stringy flesh of these birds as a welcome change from the vile hard tack and mouldy meal which was their staple diet. Today the sky was empty however and the boy hunter had wearied of his vigilance.

Matthew Simpson retracted his telescope and leaned back from the rail. His face, though gaunt, had still some of his early eagerness about it. 'But think what pleasure and profit comes from hard won victories,' he said.

'Victories for some mean losses for others,' said Calum Colquhoun in a low voice.

Matthew Simpson turned to reply. 'But isn't that the way of the world, man?'

'You mean the will o' God, eh Meenister?' said Calum to John. 'Does it no make ye wonder about striving at all, if our fate's in the hands o' the Almighty?'

'Mind your tongue, Calum,' said John, with no real intent to rebuke. In truth he enjoyed the man's banter as a distraction from the ills and discomforts of the journey. 'I thought for a moment you might be blaspheming.'

'I fear we're wasting our breath with Calum,' said Matthew Simpson with a smile. 'But I believe that God sees our virtuous striving against adversity, knowing that it builds in us feeble creatures both courage and strength.'

‘Aye, but both of these two virtues do not come easy to those with empty bellies, Master Simpson,’ said Lieutenant Munro. ‘We’re to put ashore at Crab Island, so we will have more fresh water and mayhap more provisions, and so with these perhaps some hope.’

At these words, David McBride hauled himself to his feet, peering with slitted eyes at the sky. ‘Look there,’ he cried, ‘Praise God for his bounties!’

Matthew Simpson trained his telescope in the direction of Davie’s pointing hand and exclaimed. ‘Aye, Master McBride,’ he said, ‘you have the eyes of an eagle. Four big gulls heading our way.’

Davie grinned and unbuckled his belt. ‘I’m sae wasted my breeks’ll fall off.’

‘Keep your shity arse awa frae us then,’ laughed one of his comrades, scrambling to his feet.

By now the group of men were standing, watching expectantly as the birds, with a few languid strokes of their wings began to descend towards the ship. Davie’s companions assembled assorted missiles collected for the purpose, pieces of nails, fragments of metal and wood, gleaned or purloined from detritus on board.

‘See, Meenister,’ said Calum to John, his face an ironic grin, ‘The Almighty hasnae forgotten us.’

‘Aye, Calum, perhaps this is His messenger come for you,’ said John, ‘to tell you to mend your ways.’

‘You two sound like idolatrous papists,’ laughed James Munro.

The boy on the foretop, alerted by the action below, was the first to take aim. John saw his arm twirling a circle faster and faster and the missile fly harmlessly past the first bird which idly continued to float on the air. On deck there was a chorus of dismay. The four birds still drifted on the air alongside.

‘Here, here, ma wee darling,’ coaxed Davie, moving closer to the rail and raising his arms slowly, holding a stone wedged in the loop of his belt. He moved with an almost balletic grace, his arm wheeling smoothly as with narrowed eyes he fixed on his victim, which was now perilously coasting only fifty feet from them to starboard. All on deck held their breath. The stone rocketed out to within a yard of one of the birds. Surprised this time, the creatures wheeled, screaming and a moment later a wet white stream came flying, blown by the wind straight into Davie’s face and splattering John’s shirt front.

‘Bitch from Hell!’ yelled Davie, wiping his mouth with his sleeve, his face a grimace of disgust, while John examined the mess on his already filthy shirt. He joined the others in

their unbridled laughter, some rolling over on the deck, as Davie McBride's breeches fell down about his ankles.

'Aye Davie,' chortled Calum Colquhoun, 'That's yer message from the Almighty. He shites on us all, even the Meenister.'

The two long weeks of the lieutenant's prediction passed, with land often in sight, heavily wooded islands, rocky stretches of cliff, but still the appointed place for the colony was not found. Boats bearing the captains and commanders plied back and forth between the ships of the fleet, for meetings of the Council. Once a boat from the *Caledonia*, loaded with casks for collecting fresh water, was sent ashore to one of the islands. It returned with a huge bird, a pelican and forty dead gannets, but no water.

Lieutenant Munro now spoke with an air of bitter fatigue when John enquired of him for news of their progress. 'It seems that we've a drunken buccaneer for a navigator, so they say, some old sea dog, picked up on Crab Island who no more knows the way than I do to the moon,' he said. 'Master Paterson can offer no assistance either.'

'But what of our commanders?' John asked.

'They argue in the Council all day long about all manner of things. With more able leaders, we could have been here a month ago, to my mind.'

'To put foot on land, to find the place will surely rally them to the task ahead,' said John. 'Their arguments must stop when there is work to be done.'

'Aye,' said James Munro, 'you're right. And duty must take the place of despair.'

The stored water was now foul and there was amongst them a new malaise. Matthew Simpson did not rise from his bed one morning and when John went to him, in the quarters below, his fever was high and he vomited foul smelling stuff. John sat with him through the day, offering what little comfort he could, reading to him from the journal of Lionel Wafer and the Scriptures, when he was not in the grip of pain. In the moments of calm between his spasms of sickness, Matthew Simpson's face had not lost its urgent earnest look.

'Do not lose faith, John. It is not God's will that I shall join you there, but you are travelling to paradise. Will you pray with me?'

'Aye, Matthew, I will, but take heart. I'm told we're not far now.'

The sick man grew quieter, his retching stopped and he closed his eyes and lay breathing quietly. There were only the two of them below and for a moment John leaned his head on the frame of the bunk, listening to the familiar groaning of the ship's moving timbers, the creaking of the swinging lantern, the gentle clink of a tin cup against a plate with

the sway of the vessel. A sad drowsiness enveloped him, his eyes closed and he fell into a doze. His next sensation was of choking, his nostrils full of a suffocating sulphurous smoke. He coughed, staggering to his feet, unable to see as his eyes watered with a stinging fog. The air was thick with it as it swirled and billowed all around the low-ceilinged quarters. The ship was on fire, but there was no crackling or licking of flames, no scorching heat, no burning fiery furnace of Hell which for a moment his fuddled brain conjured. Matthew Simpson moaned and called out in a weak voice. John lurched towards him, reaching for his arm, thinking only that he must get them both up and out of the place somehow.

‘Anybody there? Get out for yer life!’ shouted a guttural voice from somewhere in the murk. Then two figures emerged, wielding the source of the smoke, two swinging bundles of cloth which they waved in arcs all around.

‘Fools, get out,’ yelled the cloaked fiend of Hell as John struggled to his feet.

‘Take him. Take him too,’ shouted John, desperately pointing at Matthew Simpson’s motionless body.

John felt himself being pushed roughly to the hatch where he stood, clinging to the ladderway, gasping for a moment, glimpsing a bright square of sky above his head and feeling the relief of a stream of air. He grasped the rail of the ladder to pull himself out. A hand reached for his and hauled him on to the deck where he fell coughing on his hands and knees.

When the two men, masked with cloths emerged, carrying Matthew Simpson on to the upper deck, he was dead. John watched as his body was dragged across the deck to where five others lay already wrapped in their canvas shrouds.

Calum Colquhoun was crouching beside John offering him a cup half full of rancid water.

‘Here, Meenister, take this. I ken you’re no a man for strong drink.’

‘Thanks to you, Calum. The smoke was to kill the pestilence, I presume,’ said John, seeing the two sailors, tearing off their scarves around their faces and dousing their smoking bundles in a bucket. ‘I hope it has more power than prayer. For a moment I thought myself truly in Hell.’

‘Naw,’ said Calum with a grim smile, ‘not you, Meenister. If there’s another place, then that’s where you’re bound.’

John took Calum’s offered hand and struggled to his feet.

A little while later, John stood by Calum Colquhoun as Lieutenant Munro read the names of those who had perished of the flux. ‘Thomas James, minister of the Kirk, Thomas

Dalrymple, planter; Michael McLean, labourer; Adam Bennett, clerk; Matthew Simpson, printer; Abel Smith, midshipman.’

Four gun blasts to mark the burials shook the vessel and deafened the ears for a moment. The bodies were slipped one by one into the water. Almost before the last had plunged below the surface, a pungent acid scent arose as the ship’s apprentices were set to scrub the decks with vinegar.

John, lying below on his bunk amidst the stink of sickness, mingled with the lingering acrid smell of smoke, gave way to the temptation to look again at the mementoes he kept of Isobel. He drew out from under the straw mattress, the bundle of her letters and her book of verse and held them close to his chest for a moment. He knew the folly and futility of such a practice which offered but a brief escape into a different type of pain, brought on by remembrances of past pleasure and delight. It was useless to renew regret, to mope and mourn for that which could never be. He hoped that Isobel’s new life allowed her to forget more successfully than he. In spite of the creeping sadness, he unfolded her first letter again, but his attention was broken by a cacophony of shouts from above. Bundling the papers away into their hiding place again, he went up on deck to discover the cause.

‘Thanks be to God,’ said Davie McBride, throwing his bonnet in the air and all that could stand or shout clamoured to watch the progress of the ship towards the land. Up high, mariners were furling the sails, slowing the ship as it followed about a league behind the *Unicorn*, through what seemed to be a natural entrance to a bay or an inlet, flanked on both sides by high wooded hills. Passing a black rock rising from the sea some eight feet or so, the ship ploughed into a wide blue bay, rimmed with shores of sand and thickly forested beyond.

‘John, by God’s providence we are safely here at last. Let us give thanks.’ John turned and found Lieutenant Munro at his side, his usually mournful expression now animated. The officer shook him vigorously by the hand.

‘God’s providence, indeed,’ muttered Calum Colquhoun, overhearing their exchange, though without the bitterness of his usual talk and with the curl of a smile on his lips. ‘Tis luck, good or ill, that rules the lives o’ men. But at least this time luck has gi’ed us a good throw o’ the dice.’

They weighed anchor just off shore, the *Unicorn* and *St Andrew* close by along the narrow peninsula which formed the northern edge of the bay. Evening drew in and the darkness descended quickly enveloping the land. At rest now, save for the gentle rocking of

the ship, the men lay in their quarters listening to the strange distant noises of birds and creatures chattering in the trees.

‘Who’ll be the first tae gang ashore?’ asked Davie McBride, as the landsmen lay on their bunks in their quarters with little talk between them, silenced it seemed by the new uncertainties of their arrival.

‘Thirty diggers and planters from each ship have to make the first landing,’ said John having gleaned something of the plans for the first settlement from James Munro. ‘We must clear the land and build shelters, then a fort to protect the site.’

‘Aye and they’ll need gie big axes to fell the likes o’ those trees,’ said Davie his voice heavy with gloom. ‘Di ye no see the size o’ them?’

John looked round the quarters, at the men lying limply in their bunks, others hollow-eyed watching the fall of the die on the boards, all half-starved as he was himself. Was this the sturdy band of pioneers needed for such a venture? But here they were, at last, after months of suffering. There was work to be done. Was their mission forgotten? He was suddenly fired with angry disappointment.

‘Which of you will come ashore?’ he said standing up and scanning his comrades. ‘Come rouse yourselves, can’t you. God damn you,’ he heard himself say.

‘Haud yer tongue, Meenister. Leave us in peace, can ye no,’ said someone.

The months of meagre food and sickness had weakened most of them, the poor cottars already skin and bone with the famine which they fled, or discharged soldiers racked with old injuries and the privations and drunkenness of war. John was luckier than most, having escaped the worst fevers and starting the voyage sounder in body than many of his fellows. He was ashamed now of his anger when he looked on the faces of these men.

John was indeed among the most hale of the men selected by a sergeant to go ashore, with implements for digging graves for the dead and then to build shelters for those like himself who were to work on the land. Other boats carrying men plied from the ships, where they were beached at several points along the white sandy shore, overlooked by a rocky headland. They alighted, the warm air embracing them and John and six others were ordered to go inland in search of clean water. Apart from the strip of beach and an edge of scrubby bushes, the land was thickly forested.

With wooden casks strung on halters over their shoulders they set off and entered a forest of immense trees. Tall cedars and other sweet-scented, straight-trunked ones, not named or known by any, grew close together. No words were spoken as the men passed through the trees, their feet sinking into the yielding leaf mould of the forest floor. The wind

moaned through branches in a strange and mournful song, while chattering and hooting birds, some with plumage of turquoise, red and green flitted between them. Monkeys could be seen carelessly dangling and swinging on branches high above. Near the base of some huge cedars, they found a stream which bubbled and tipped out its water in generous gulps, then a waterfall splashing over rocks into a pool in the balmy glade. Filling their mouths and bellies then the casks, they returned to the beach, coming out into the sharp brightness of blue sky and sea.

Already there were diggers hacking at the earth, clearing the bushy grasses from the strip of land parallel to the shore. John caught sight of a group of them, wielding their mattocks in a regular rhythm and was puzzled for a moment by their familiarity. Then he knew that he had last seen them digging on their rigs in Colinton, all those months ago on the other side of the world. One of those bent in toil was Alexander Jamieson, he was sure. Could he steal a way for a while, he wondered, looking around in the hope that no officers would see his momentary desertion. He had a strong wish to greet the Colinton men.

Alexander Jamieson looked gaunt and pale, as most did, but he smiled broadly when he saw John approaching and took off his bonnet.

John extended his hand to the cottar who took it uncertainly then gripped it firmly. 'Master Jamieson, how are you faring? I'm pleased and surprised to see you here.'

'Aye Maister, I didnae ken ye were coming here. But what are ye doing labouring, you a schoolmaster an all?'

'No longer, Master Jamieson,' said John noticing the curious faces of the cottars trained on him.

'You were ill used, Maister,' said Alexander Jamieson, shaking his head, 'back then.'

'No matter,' said John, 'that is past now. We have more to concern us here.' John was aware of a sergeant approaching and took his leave of the cottar.

'I must to my toil. We will speak later.'

'Aye Maister, I'm right glad tae see ye here. It lifts my heart and my spirits tae see ye among us.'

In a clearing close to the shore, with spades and mattocks they gouged hollow trenches for the dead to lie in. John, Calum and the other water carriers were ordered to this task and soon they were labouring in the heat of the sun, with clouds of buzzing insects about their heads, creeping into the mouths, ears and nostrils. Clawing at his skin and wiping his face with his shirt sleeve for momentary relief from the flies, John worked at the side of Calum Colquhoun, whose slight figure belied considerable physical strength.

‘Naw,’ he said, when he saw John’s attempts to break the clumps of soil with his mattock and wresting it from him, demonstrated a swinging, relaxed technique. ‘You’ll ruin yersel, like that,’ he continued, ‘in this heat with these scabbit creatures plaguing us.’

‘I fear I’m not much practised at digging. Fit for reading and writing but not much else. The works of the ancients are poor preparation for this.’

‘Nor reading the Scriptures neither,’ replied Calum with a grim smile. ‘Well, ye’ll be well used tae it soon, for there’s much ahead. We’ve tae make a town o’ this place, but if we get nae more tae fill our bellies we’ll drop dead before it’s done.’ Calum paused and straightened his back.

‘You’ll be praying for the souls of the dead, will ye, Meenister, that’s if you’re not taken yersel’?’

‘Aye, Calum, I will,’ said John, stopping to slap his neck to relieve the itching, sensing Calum’s keenness to engage him in debate. ‘I’ve no stomach to argue with you today. But tell me, did you never suffer the wrath of the Kirk for your blasphemies?’

‘Naw,’ he replied, ‘for I kept ma mouth shut. I’d no wish to be sack-clothed or chained in the stocks.’

‘But you don’t keep your thoughts to yourself any more?’

‘What need? There’s no law and no Kirk here? Wi’ nearly all the blethering ministers deid and with militia in charge there’s no talk o’ that sort of stuff.’

‘Aye, but there will be, for the Council is to establish a new constitution.’

‘Oh aye,’ said Calum, ‘so as the Kirk can tell all the poor folk that they must toil and sweat and die here for the good of their immortal souls in the next life?’

‘Calum, damn you, man,’ said John exasperated. Would flies and the heat not distract him from his tormenting? ‘You test me and I’ve no answers for you. Do you never give up?’

‘Oh dinnae damn me, Meenister, for that’s you and the Almighty both,’ Calum said with a dry laugh, grasping John’s shoulder. ‘But if the truth be known, I’d rather be damned by God and the Holy Trinity than by yersel’.’

John shook his head, unable to sustain his anger. There was no malice in his mischievous comrade, brazen and blasphemous though he was. Beneath Calum’s irony, John suspected, lay a longing for proof that his morbid views were false.

Stopping for a moment’s respite from their work, more than a dozen trenches dug in the dark earth, the men turned to watch as two more skiffs approached the shore from the ships in the bay. The first was pulled up on the beach and among those alighting was a woman. John recognised Susan immediately, feeling a flood of affection at seeing her. She

climbed without aid over the side of the boat and stepped on to the sand. There was no sign of her mistress. Half a dozen bodies cocooned in canvas were lifted out one by one and laid on wooden planks ready for burial, in this foreign place which was to have been their new home.

‘Are there are any ye ken among the dead?’ said Calum, seeing that John’s attention was drawn to the new arrivals.

‘Aye, maybe, though I hope I’m mistaken. There’s William Paterson, but I cannot see his wife. See, he is the one that stands tallest among the others. I was acquainted with Mistress Paterson some time ago. I must find out if she’s here. The woman standing there is Mistress Paterson’s servant. I have never met a more faithful, worthy soul, one who has no thought for herself, only to serve others.’

‘Whit’s this, Meenister?’ said Calum. ‘Is this no the woman close tae your heart, the one who troubles your dreams, your Isobel?’

Hearing Isobel’s name brought a flush to John’s face. He was shocked to know that he had spoken his secret thoughts aloud while his mind was loosed and unguarded in sleep. Now Calum would taunt him, torture him for this. But instead his companion seemed quiet, almost meditative.

‘Dinnae fash yersel’, Calum said. ‘It’s only the once or twice I’ve heard ye speak that name in yer dreams, just a whisper, nae more.’

‘No, that woman is not Isobel,’ said John, looking across at Susan and wiping his brow with his sleeve.

His companion paused to scrape from his forearm some of the large brown gnats which had found them out and attached themselves fast to the skin.

‘Is she bonny, your Isobel?’

‘Aye, she is,’ said John, with painful gratitude to this unlikely confidant. He felt the release of his confession, though it provoked the familiar, painful longings. ‘Aye, she is beautiful and kind, full of wit and cleverness too. But she is not mine, nor will she ever be.’

‘Pity,’ said Calum swiping at the flies again.

All digging ceased as the funeral procession moved slowly up the beach and came towards them, led by a minister of the Kirk, along with Master Paterson, some other gentlemen and soldiers including James Munro. John saw the diggers’ eyes following Susan for she was one of the few women left in the expedition, as far as John could tell. She wore a hat with a veil to conceal her face as was her wont when among those who did not know her. The party stopped at about fifty paces away from the graves and the minister read the names

of the departed and John heard Mistress Elizabeth Paterson among them. The company stood, heads bowed as the bodies were laid by the burial trenches. A final prayer was offered up and the soldiers lowered the dead into the earth, while the mourners and others remained at a distance.

‘I must speak with them if I can,’ said John to Calum, laying down his spade and making his way to where the group of gentlemen stood. Susan, he noticed, had moved apart from the group, had turned away from them and was walking along the edge of the sandy shore, looking out at the bay.

‘Sir,’ said John, approaching William Paterson who stood with some others, ‘pardon my intrusion, gentlemen. Master Paterson may I offer you my condolences for your grievous loss. Mistress Paterson was a most kind and generous lady.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said William Paterson, his deep sunken eyes expressing a look of puzzlement for a moment, before recognition lit them. ‘Master Wyllie, from Colinton, is it not? You are much altered in your condition I see.’

‘Yes sir,’ said John, noting no sign that William Paterson had knowledge of his disgrace.

‘My dear wife now lies where we will found our new city,’ he said in a heavy voice, ‘for her resting place is to be New Edinburgh.’

When John asked if he might have permission to speak to Susan, William Paterson nodded absently and with no further comment, turned to his companions and engaged again in urgent talk, as though the death of his wife had interrupted more important business. Susan had gone a short distance along the sand, walking slowly near the gentle incoming wash of waves. When he was within a few paces she turned, seeming to sense his presence. The veil obscured her expression, but she stood motionless upon the spot.

‘Forgive me, Susan for coming upon you in your grief. We would be well met, but for your mistress’s death. I am so sorry,’ he said quietly.

She lifted her veil and revealed her face, with the livid red mark, the pale eyes which he saw were full of tears. Her lower lip was trembling too and he could see that she could not speak, overcome with her grief and the strangeness of the place, he supposed. She stepped quickly to him and then fell on her knees at his feet, taking his hand in both of hers and pressing it to her lips.

Chapter 26

October 1697 – March 1698

London

The weather was kind to them for the beginning of their journey, chill and clear with no rain. They walked on the main highway in the hope of finding some means of conveyance for at least part of the way to London, for Jean Fletcher was suffering badly. Isobel could see the exhaustion in her mother's face and in her body. She had weeping blisters on her feet which had to be bound, to allow her to proceed at all. Her father was remarkable in his resilience for all his halting gait, his right leg weak and jerky and his right arm cradled in his left hand. But his back was strong and he made light of his fatigue.

They toiled twenty miles or so southbound on the highway before a wagon rolled up at their side and the driver shouted to them.

'Goin' as far as Harlow, if you're headed that way.'

'Thank ye kindly sir,' said David Fletcher.

'From the north are ye?' questioned the man, eyeing Isobel and patting the board beside where he sat.

'Father, you sit up front,' said Isobel quickly. 'Mother, come let's climb up behind.'

'Scotch are ye? Headed for London?' continued the curious man, pushing his hat back on his head to reveal a wide brow and no visible hair line. 'Oh well, find all sorts in London town. Few more foreigners won't make no difference I suppose.'

Flushed with ale and the sale of his sheep at the market, the farmer was happy to tell of his good fortune and to share with them his meal of bread, cheese and beer prepared by his wife. He left them in the village of Harlow, a pleasant place not so many miles from their destination. Here David Fletcher sold some of his tools to an ironmonger who praised their quality and workmanship as he passed over the silver pieces. He and Isobel fell silent at their loss, but they knew that the money would furnish them with a comfortable bed and a good supper at an inn that night, with some left over to pay for lodgings in London.

Two more days' walking brought them tired but grateful to the bustling streets of Whitechapel to the east of the great city of London. Glad to enter the safe anonymity of a crowd, Isobel felt the strangeness too of their fugitive state. She was dogged by fears of their

fate if she was not able to find work. As they walked, they passed many ragged people, some lying moribund in the street while other younger ones dodged about among the passersby, offering their services to anyone carrying a burden of any sort. Isobel and her parents stopped for a pot of ale at an inn in Aldgate and there asked directions to the great church of St Paul where David Fletcher had heard that many bookbinders' shops lay.

'Lookin' for lodgins, is yer? Ain't goin' to find them there. It's far too dear, beggin' yer pardon of course,' said the landlady scrutinising them. 'Most Scotch folks put up in Spitalfields or round about. 'Ere Em,' she shouted to a woman sweeping the floor of a small room adjacent to the parlour where they sat. 'There's folks 'ere lookin' for rooms.'

The woman called Em directed them to a lane off Eastcheap, a place of tightly-packed houses and smoky air. They found a place of two small apartments which were clean enough and where the landlady seemed kind and respectable. Here they rested the next day, only venturing out to buy firewood and provisions, so wearied and footsore they were after their journey. The following day, the wind blew in, bringing more rain but Isobel knew that she must go in search of work.

'Lassie,' said David Fletcher, 'let me come with you.'

'No, father, there's no need. Stay here and rest.'

The cold and rain of their last day on the road had taken its toll and now her father had a cough deep in his chest and seemed constantly chilled.

'Take care and be back here before dark, mind,' said Jean Fletcher, grasping Isobel's hand.

She was not happy to leave her parents sitting by the meagre fire, wrapped in their plaids but stepped out on to the street, assuming a purposeful air which she did not feel, her bundle of books and samples under her arm. The day was damp, so she pulled up her shawl around her head and took the path west alongside the River Thames to find the city and St Pauls. The river was wide and brown like a great shining ribbon dotted with a moving multitude of craft, small boats, skiffs and grand barges, fluttering with draperies. All along the banks stood tall buildings, warehouses and private mansions, with some new buildings framed with scaffolding, the yards around them busy with the noise of masons and carpenters hard at work. This filled her with hope for she thought of this vast metropolis and its multitudes of trades and businesses. Here she would surely find work.

Soon she spied the great unfinished roof of the church of St Paul and headed towards it and the streets where she might find workshops of her craft. One busy street called Paternoster Row contained a number of bookbinders' workshops as well as booksellers,

stationers and printers. Emboldened by her earlier optimism, Isobel knocked on the first of the shop doors and entered. It was a cluttered place, with many half-finished volumes, some carelessly cast aside as though the craftsman had tired of them. But the smells were familiar and Isobel breathed them with the relief of recognition, like greeting an old friend. A grey-haired man was bent over a lying press in the corner.

‘Good day, sir,’ she ventured.

The man turned a face almost as grey as his hair towards her and stared for a moment with no movement of the deep lines around his mouth.

‘What do you want, young woman?’

‘Sir, I come looking for work,’ said Isobel seeing no sign of welcome in his face.

‘I’ve no need of servants,’ he replied, his voice expressionless as his face, though his eyes rested for a moment on the bundle she held.

‘No sir, I’m not a servant. I’m a bookbinder, fully skilled in all forwarding and finishing work. I’ve been apprenticed to my father. He is a master of his craft. I have some work here to show...’

‘Is that so?’ he interrupted, his mouth more animated and his eyes narrowing, which did nothing to produce a more friendly demeanour. ‘Don’t trouble yourself, young woman. I have no need of another binder. And even if I had, I would have no woman in my workshop. Now be gone.’ He went to turn his back and Isobel felt the heat in her face, the anger rise in her throat.

‘Sir, forgive me for speaking out, but it would seem to me, that you have sore need to someone to help you clear this unfinished work. It appears that you are hard pressed and could use another to assist you.’

‘Have I not made myself plain?’ said the man, a frown forming in the lines of his brow. ‘You Scotch hussy. You dare to speak to me like that in my own shop. No woman can do a man’s work. I’d sooner have a Bedlam beggar in my shop than the likes of you, coming in here with your harlot’s ways.’

Isobel fled the place, quaking with impotent anger, breathing hard to calm herself, feeling the cold drops of rain on her face. Was this to be her fate? To be belittled, patronised by men, to have no one, apart from her father, acknowledge her abilities? She felt the tears of indignation and hurt sting her eyes and walking briskly, nearly slipping and dropping her bundle. Was she a fool to think the praises of the men she loved were true admiration of her skill? Her father would not lie to her, though Thomas and John in their affection might have indulged her. But then many customers had sought out her work. Her skills had been

commissioned. This was surely proof enough. She would not be beaten down by such a one as he.

She tried another two shops close by, with no more success, though one proprietor smiled kindly at her and apologised for having no work. The other shook his head dubiously and his eyes lingered too long on her figure and it was plain that he had little interest in her skill at her craft. Neither had been willing to look at her samples of work. She had a small black leather blind-tooled prayer book, an ornate gold-tooled bible and a simple woodcut decorated alphabet for children, as well as some small pieces of her finest embroidered covers. Her most impressive work had of course been sold to pay for their losses in Edinburgh. Nicolas Payne had shown little interest in her work and had never asked for any show of it. She thought despondently about how this craft which she loved and into which she poured her heart and energy, was so little valued in the wider world.

Coming out again on to the street from her third attempt, she felt more drops of rain on her face and was tempted sorely to return to her parents in their lodgings. Yet the thought that she would only bring them ill news, made her trudge once more down the main thoroughfare of Ludgate Street and seek out the lanes and alleys for other bookbinders' workshops. In Ivy Lane, off Paternoster Row she spied a small shop with many square windows of glass and a neat front to the street, not unlike their own in Edinburgh, though more ornately painted and with a gilt painted sign which read, 'M. Jacques Padeloup, Bookbinder'.

She approached and peeping through the window saw no one within. Then she knocked on the door and receiving no reply, thought that perhaps the owner was at work at a far end of the shop and had failed to hear. Bruised by her earlier disappointments, she struggled with her courage and made herself turn the handle and enter. Inside were all the trappings of her craft, well-stocked shelves with leather covers, pots and tools, stitching machines and two benches with parchment and papers and folios in various stages of preparation, all neat and workmanlike, except that there were no workmen. Isobel's eye was drawn to examine the materials of the half-finished pieces. They looked fine and intricate and she longed to touch and examine one more closely. She was bending over, scrutinising the endbands of cane which were partly complete on a large volume lying on a bench, when someone spoke.

'May I help you please, Mademoiselle?' said a foreign accented voice which made her jump.

‘Sir, pardon me,’ Isobel said, recoiling from the bench guiltily, though she had committed no crime beyond the exercise of her curiosity.

The speaker was a small-faced man, gaunt and dark-eyed, short of stature with wire spectacles adhering to the bridge of his nose. He wore a periwig, perched at a slant upon the head of dark curls of his own hair just showing beneath and a neat black satin coat.

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ Isobel said again, ‘I have come to enquire,’ and she paused, embarrassed for he watched her so intently, ‘if you have any work, for I am practised in this craft and seek employment.’

She waited for his response but instead he said nothing and remained in a still pose, silently watching, but without any of the antagonism she had encountered in her trials so far. Isobel had no choice but to proceed for it was clear that he would not break the silence.

‘I was looking at your work and am much taken by this technique here, this method of stitching the end band. I have not seen double stitching exactly like this before, though I have done much similar work. I have some here, if you would care to look,’ she said pointing to her bundle which she had placed on the floor.

‘Mademoiselle, I would be pleased to see your work. Forgive me, but as you spoke, you made me think of..., no matter,’ he said, seeming distracted for a moment by some private thought.

So Isobel drew out her books and spread them on the bench as he directed.

‘I see, I see,’ he said, pushing his spectacles further up his nose and holding up the bible close to his face. He examined the construction and design of each one in all aspects it seemed with great attention, though saying nothing throughout the process. Then he turned to her.

‘Mademoiselle, I think we need some refreshment. I will go, excuse me, to ask my wife,’ and he disappeared quickly through a doorway at the back of the workshop. Isobel heard him talking rapidly in a foreign tongue which she took to be French from his name, his accent and her own scanty exposure to that language.

A moment later he returned and smiled warmly at her. ‘Mademoiselle, your name is?’ She had only just uttered it when a woman entered by the same doorway a moment later, carrying a tray containing a decanter of wine, some glasses and a yellow cake. She, like her husband was short and wore an elegant but plain black gown, a cap of lace and neat matching collar. Her hair was drawn back from her face severely to reveal her handsome features, though the skin was lined and shadowed underneath her eyes.

‘Ma chère,’ said the proprietor, ‘this is Mademoiselle Fletcher, a binder who is seeking a position with us. Mademoiselle, this is my wife, Madame Padeloup.’

Isobel curtseyed and bowed her head and suddenly heard the woman cry out to her husband who quickly took the tray and set it down.

‘C’est vrai, c’est vrai, elle ressemble tout à fait notre chère Francine.’

‘Forgive my wife,’ said Monsieur Padeloup, ‘it is that you are like someone else we used to know. It is a shock, you know. Nous nous excusons, Mademoiselle.’

He still had passed no comment upon Isobel’s work nor indeed her prospects of employment with him, but he bid her sit and take a glass of wine.

‘Mademoiselle Fletcher. I would be delighted to have you in my employ, but tell me a little of yourself and how you come to be here. I think you are a foreigner in London too, like us.’

Isobel told him a version of their sad tale, though omitting exact accounts of the story of Thomas and of their time in Cambridge, cloaking both in a kind of vagueness which she hoped he would not find suspicious. She told him of her father’s terrible affliction and of their standing in Edinburgh before their troubles began. She made it plain that only she had the means to support her parents.

‘You are a gifted craftswoman and artist, Mademoiselle Fletcher, as many of my own countrywomen are too. Please return here tomorrow and bring your parents as I would be honoured to meet them.’

Isobel thanked them with all her heart, for their promise of employment and their kind consideration and stepped out on to the street. Though the rain was quite heavy, Isobel exulted in it for what was a little dampness when she had secured a position? She pulled her plaid over her head and held her bundle of books under cover as she retraced her steps the way she had come. The walk back reminded her, for a disturbing moment or two, of the high hopes after their first encounter with Nicolas Payne in Cambridge. But there was no reason to suspect the motives or character of her new employers, for though they were foreigners, as Monsieur Padeloup had pointed out, so were she and her parents. Monsieur Padeloup and his wife were no doubt papists, as she knew was the case with most of the French. But what did this matter? This was London not Edinburgh and all sorts of foreigners seemed to go freely here with no hindrance. She was curious to know what had caused them to quit their native land. And who was the person they called Francine, the memory of whom had been sparked by her arrival?

‘Oh my lassie, what news,’ said her mother, when Isobel came back with her good tidings. ‘David, are you not proud of our daughter?’

‘Aye, my dear,’ said her husband, clasping Isobel to his chest.

‘That’s one in the eye for Master Nicolas Payne, don’t you think?’ said Isobel smiling up at him. Monsieur Padeloup says that there are many Frenchwomen of our craft. Isn’t that fine?’

‘Aye and the French work is among the best that I’ve seen,’ said David Fletcher with energy.

Her father’s anticipation of his meeting with Monsieur Padeloup revived his spirits, so their evening was spent with some welcome peace and repose of mind. The next day they all repaired to Ivy Lane and were entertained most courteously by Monsieur and Madame Padeloup. Isobel could not remember when last she had enjoyed being in company and she found her new employers’ civility and offers of friendship so comforting that she began to doubt the reality of her experience. They did not, however, reveal much about their past lives, beyond an indication that Monsieur Padeloup had left Paris, where he and his brother had a prosperous bookbinding business, for family reasons. They had only been a year in London but had found already an interest in the French styles and techniques. So it seemed that the couple, like the Fletchers, had confidences about their past they were not so ready to share.

Isobel could not have wished for a kinder or better employer and, short of working again alongside her father in their little Edinburgh workshop, there was nowhere else she would rather have been. She learned quickly some new decorative effects, popular in France, and Monsieur Padeloup allowed her also to explore her own designs and embellish his as she saw fit. He made her leave her bench at seven o’clock every evening, although she would gladly have worked on to please him and to indulge her love of the craft. He let her deal with customers too, allowing her the freedom to advise them, just as she had done when she had been her own mistress. The business was small but steady with customers, many of them of foreign origin.

Each evening on her return, she would tell her father of her work and he, fascinated by her descriptions of each book she completed, seemed to derive pleasure from her talk. Her worry, that it might be bitter for him to hear of it, to be reminded of what he had lost, was unfounded.

‘And are you content, lassie?’ said her mother.

‘Aye, mother, I am,’ she replied, ‘so long as the proud master bookbinder of Cambridge does not come after me, then I’ll be happy.’

‘It’s most like he’s found another object of his desire,’ said her father, ‘and he may well think we’ve returned to our homeland.’

There was some comfort in her father’s words. It was foolish to think that Nicolas Payne’s controlling nature would send him after them to London. The niggling anxiety that he might seek revenge or recompense for the hurt he had suffered stayed with her. But their immediate dangers and worries were gone.

Isobel should have been completely content. She knew it. She knew too the reason for the gulf, the absence within her, the loss and the longing. These feelings had only been deflected in the face of their day to day trials, but now they returned, stronger and deeper than ever. She had vowed not to think of John, not to torment herself. She tried to dismiss the memories of him when they invaded her mind, as they too often did. Even when locked into her promise with Nicolas Payne, she had been unable to suppress her lasting desire for John. Now, in the luxury of her reclaimed freedom, she found herself tossed between extremes of feeling: delight at her escape and tantalising indecision about whether to try and renew contact with him again, to discover if there could ever be any hope of retrieving his love.

She thought of the many letters she had started since their arrival in London. She had torn them up and tossed them away as useless, pointless things. Why did she try to breathe life into a dead hope? Why could she not close forever that chapter of her life? John might have quit Edinburgh, or if not would have no expectation of receiving any word from her at all. There had been no reply to her final painful message of farewell and she had expected none.

If she were to write, she risked disappointment and the ravages of regret. Firstly the letter might never reach him or if he did receive it, hurt and insulted at her inconstancy, he might spurn her offer of a chance to revive their affections. He might have forgotten her utterly and completely, though she could not believe this. He could be wed to someone else, a more worthy woman than she had proved herself to be. These thoughts and the sight of John’s portrait which she would take from her box, often brought her close to tears. Re-reading his letters and his poem summoned an agonising mix of pain and joy.

One day, having gazed at his likeness again, she rebuked herself for such weakness and indecision. She picked up quill and ink and started a letter in earnest. She had languished long enough. It was time to act. She must have some certainty. It was better,

surely, to know that all hope was lost, than to spend the rest of her life in bitter ignorance and regret.

Clement Lane, London

November 1697

Dear John,

I hope and pray that if ever you read this, it finds you in a state of health and happiness. If you are blessed with these and with the grace of God, it is no more than you deserve. I add also my own blessings and kind wishes.

John, can you find it in your heart to forgive me, I who have spurned you twice, once in anguished foolishness and despair, the second time from terrible necessity? Now, in spite of all my fears and even after my promise to marry a man for whom I had no feelings, I find myself miraculously free. Shameful though you will think me, a woman who flees from an honourable contract, a bargain approved of and consented to by all, I wonder if you can suspend your judgement of me until you hear a little of the story.

The discovery of my master's true character and that of his son, before our marriage could take place, threw me into a state of desperation from which my loving and brave parents persuaded me to escape. We fled like thieves one night and travelled to London where we hoped for the sanctuary that a teeming city affords. I cannot state more of this painful matter, but hope that you will not judge me as one who bestows my word lightly and with no depth of feeling.

Now I am happy to find myself in secure employment with a respectable bookbinder of repute, so we no longer fear destitution. I thank God each day for our good fortune and beg his forgiveness for my weakness.

John, if your heart is now bound to another, allow me to wish you joy and love throughout your lives. To know this would make the final severance of my bond to you less painful. But if you are free, (this I can hardly write and dare not hope), if you are willing to accept this renewed pledge of my love for you, which never died, never diminished through all my trials, I could know of no more blissful state upon this earth than to hear that you return my affection.

No day dawns for me without thoughts of you. I pray that you may soon read this confession from your loving

Isobel

A hard, cold winter came and went and it was not until a chilly March that the city showed signs of life again, with small buds peppering the branches and early weeds pushing through the dirt of paths and at the sides of tracks. For a month, Isobel had tried to stem the surge of anticipation at the thought of a reply from John, though this vain thwarted hope led to a sinking of her spirits, like entering a dark pit. How could he not reply to her? Had he no shred of courtesy to send a brief note? Even as he bedded a wife who would enjoy him as she never would, did he never think of her? She had changed his life, so he had professed in his poem. She read it again, crumpled it viciously in her hand. These were merely words on paper, written a year ago, meaningless now to him. She went to toss it into the fire, but held back, instead easing out the damaged paper carefully, flattening it again and placing it between the leaves of her prayer book.

Then she wrote and sent another letter, convinced that the first had gone astray, then another one month later. Now that the Spring was arriving, she resolved to try only once more and if this proved fruitless, she would stifle all hope and all fantasy forever. But writing to John always cheered her, tricking her near-dead dreams to revive. So on a cold bright March day, she found herself stepping lightly along the roadway on her return to the workshop, after depositing her letter at the posting inn, buoyed by the optimism which came with a renewed endeavour. There was hope, she thought, however slight and she saw in her mind John opening her letter and imagined the overwhelming delight of receiving one from him.

Smiling with the warmth of this secret thought, she turned into Beaulieu Gardens, a fashionable street of newly built tall houses. On the bottom step of the stairs to one of the houses, a small maidservant was bent over scrubbing. Two other maids in their straw hats and shawls appeared from an alley at the back of the houses, chattering with their baskets over their arms on their way to market. At the far end of the street, Isobel saw a group of young men, proceeding slowly and untidily up in her direction. She could see, even from this distance of fifty paces, their dishevelled evening wear, and the unsteady gait of those whose nightlong entertainment had left its effect.

Isobel crossed to the other side of the street, preferring to avoid an encounter. She heard them shout at the maids who trotted past them, giggling. A gig flew into the street and one of the band lurched dangerously into its path, being pulled to safety by another of his companions. Loud curses followed and one chased for a few steps after the driver with raised fist. As Isobel drew nearer, she saw the brocade and silk of their garments, their curled wigs

and noticed that they were all young gentlemen. She heard their tired quarrelsome talk and then one let out a yell in her direction.

‘I say you, wench! Stay a moment!’

One swift glance was enough to strike Isobel like a sudden blow to the head, as the speaker, recognisable in that instant was the silk-clad, plump-faced Francis Payne, son of Nicolas.

Chapter 27

December 1697 Darien

It was a solemn occasion. All had been summoned. Even those who were lodged on the ships and who never set foot on the land came ashore. The commander, Admiral Pennicuik, the councillors and two ladies, all bewigged and bedecked in their best clothes in spite of the steaming dampness of the day, stood upon a mound near the huts, under a rough canopy of canvas and leaves, facing the crowd of settlers. Around them, the soldiers stood to attention in stained scarlet uniforms. The torrential rain had slackened to a steady downpour.

Susan lurked behind John, Calum, Davie McBride and the other diggers and planters, for her gown was in a sorry state, though she had stitched up the tears as best she could. Her apron of sacking was hardly a thing for a grand ceremony and her veil was long gone, being now a bloodied bandage round a poor man's cut arm. Standing behind, she also could hide her face from the eyes of the fine folks and the sailors from the other ships, but those that worked on the land were well used to her now. She peeped at the backs of her fellow landmen, all looking like beggars now, their life being so hard and with nothing left they could call Sunday best.

On the mound, along with the other important folk but a little apart, Master Paterson stood with a stoop, his mouth dragged down with disappointment. He complained every day that by now the fort should be finished and armed, not merely a half-built stockade. Trade should be flourishing too, with other towns and settlements along the coast, but no one wanted their wares, ill-chosen and useless in these parts. Master Paterson for all his moaning and blustering was the only one of these gentlefolks who lived ashore with the diggers and planters, in a wooden cabin close to the fort. The councillors and the better sort of folk from the ships looked sounder in health because, so Susan had heard, their food was more plentiful and richer than the mean stuff that the landmen had to stomach ashore. Captain Drummond stood with the other officers at the foot of the mound, his face a hard mask so none could read his thoughts.

Then, further away in another group of landmen, were the Colinton men, Alexander Jamieson and three of his neighbours, cottars whose children had been at the school. She was glad of their familiar presence here in the settlement, though they suffered badly from the ills of the place. Alexander Jamieson was the fittest amongst them all, but he had been struck down with fever several times and this day looked sick and unsteady on his feet. Susan

thought of the Jamieson family back home in their poor cottage, with all their hopes pinned on this one man who toiled for them on the other side of the world.

The rain still fell without cease. Susan, feeling the weight of her sodden gown on her body and seeing the dark, plastered-down hair of John and his comrades, heartily wished the ceremony over so that they could all make off and take shelter, especially the poor sick folk. But then the gentleman in the biggest wig, a councillor, stepped forward to address the assembly. A servant shielded him from the rain with a rough umbrella, fashioned of the flat, shiny leaves which were plentiful in the forest. The councillor waved a paper proudly at them from which he read, in a voice heavy with importance, all about the colony and the Company of Scotland. Susan listened hard to catch his message, something about the constitution which she did not grasp in its fullness.

She heard Calum Colquhoun snort in front of her. ‘All fu’ of blether as usual,’ he muttered under his breath. ‘I’d sooner listen tae a pig farting.’

Then the councillor’s voice rose proudly. ‘All men of the colony are free with equal privileges and rights.’

Calum let out a splutter. ‘Oh aye? Whit’s that he’s saying? Does he mean we can have equal rights tae the vittels served to the gentry on the ships?’

‘Aye, and can we tak our ease on board, while the fine folks shovel mud all o’ the day in the rain?’ laughed Davie McBride.

There were a few sniggers all around and Susan feared it might draw the attention of Captain Drummond. The speaker paused, aware of the noise of mischief makers, but he puckered his mouth, shook his paper and went on. ‘There will be a full and free liberty of conscience in matter of religion.’

At this Calum Colquhoun’s body shook and he let out a chuckle again, ‘Oh ho, I like the sound o’ this fine. A land wi’ no Kirk.’ Susan saw John reach for his arm and heard him whisper. ‘Calum, best guard your tongue. This is no place for debate.’

‘Haud yer wheesht, Colquhoun, for you’ll have us all whipped for your talk,’ said another of the landmen.

‘Whit, Meenister, is he no telling us we’re tae tolerate papists?’ said Calum, lowering his voice. ‘Is this no good news tae a liberal thinking man such as yersel?’ Susan could not hear John’s quiet reply.

The councillor’s voice swooped again. ‘Here we are in one of the most healthful, rich and fruitful countries upon earth –’ At these words he was silenced by the gushing of water through a hole in his makeshift umbrella. Susan thought she would burst trying to stop her

urge to giggle until she heard Calum chuckling loudly and all around her the sound of laughter. John was smothering his mouth in his sleeve. At least the councillor's wig had soaked up most of the stream as he danced about in his useless attempts to avoid what had already landed upon him. They were not quieted until Captain Drummond stepped forward, his hand on the hilt of his sword and casting a dangerous stare at them all. This quelled the last rumble of laughter so that the councillor could finish.

'Here we are in one of the most healthful, rich and fruitful countries upon earth,' he recapped, while the water dripped from his wig, 'and from your labour will come the blessing of prosperity.'

'Healthful indeed,' muttered Davie McBride, his eyes still leaking with tears of mirth, 'creeping beasties crawling all on yer skin and sucking yer blood.' Susan wondered how this gentleman before them could be ignorant of all those who had died in agonies of fever or flux since the landing, nor of the misery of the half-starved men with their grog-fuelled curses in their shelters at night. All had laboured and none had tasted prosperity.

'And now, by virtue of the before-mentioned powers to us given, we do here settle and in the name of God establish ourselves; and in honour and for the memory of that most ancient and renowned name of our Mother Country, we do, and will from henceforward call this country by the name of Caledonia: and ourselves, successors, and associates, by the name of Caledonians.'

'Aye weel, at least we'll know the name o' the place where we breathed our last,' said Calum Colquhoun.

There was a pitiable thin halloo from a few of the gathering, while some others bowed their heads and prayed. There was no rest after this, for Captain Drummond ordered the landsmen all back to work, as the rain had slackened a little. More trees had to be felled, for all their labour of the last weeks had been washed away. Susan did not join the men this time, though she had hauled many logs and branches to make shelters at the beginning. Her task today was to find food.

Provisions had arrived from the ships but they were too scanty by half for the hunger of the men or so full of maggots as to turn the strongest stomach. Some poor souls could hardly lift an axe or a spade, they were so weak for want of nourishment or sick with the fevers that attacked them all. The air was so heavy, sometimes, that Susan's body felt weighted with stone, each movement a trial of her will. She was better than many, though her arms had lost some of their flesh and she discovered bones in her chest and hips she had not known before. Along with hunger and sickness, there were other enemies: the plagues of

crawling and flying insects which bit and stung day and night, and snakes. The itching drove some to tear at their skin to ease it or plunge into the sea which gave at least a moment of relief. Two men had died from the venom of snakebites and Susan had discovered a great greenish coil in her shelter one day, but had battered its brains with a mattock.

But for all the pain of it, Susan had wanted this, to be here and nowhere else. She'd done as she'd vowed to Captain Drummond, the day she had begged him to let her stay ashore with the landsmen and not return to stay aboard ship. Driven by a more powerful force than fear, she had gone to him after they had buried the Missus that first day on land.

'What, woman? Work on the land? Are you mad?' he had said, his lip curling as he looked at her. 'It is no fit place for a woman, here among men doing rough labour, even for a servant. You must return to the *Unicorn* immediately.'

'But sir, if you please. I ain't never been poorly. I can cook for the men and tend them when they gets sick and I works like a ox. Master Paterson himself will tell yer. I been a 'ard labourer all me life, sir. I don't need no comforts, nor nothin'.'

His eyes narrowed. 'Aye, if you've a will to labour, God knows we have need of all strong hands,' he grunted, adding with sour smile, 'And your face will protect you no doubt from the men.'

On that first day, Susan joined a team of men felling trees.

'Whit's this, a lassie?' said one of them.

'Dinnae ken,' grinned his companion.

Susan knew that she must bear their comments and looks for a while, but this troubled her little enough, as her mind was elsewhere. She looked for John, but there was no sign of him or his working companions. She saw other landsmen, including the Colinton men, along near the shore, making shelters of logs and canvas roofs, thickened with branches.

Susan and three of her fellow workers were set to dragging the great felled logs to the foot of the hill where the stockade was to be built. Sweat fell from her as she lifted and hauled the weight. A small man behind her lost his footing and let go of his side of the log. Susan strained to keep it aloft, bearing most of the burden until they eventually reached the place. John, Calum and some others were there only a short distance away, tying ropes to the logs to haul them up to the top. Her chest heaved with the effort and the gladness of seeing him. She stopped to draw breath and to wipe her face on her apron. The breeze carried snippets of the men's talk to where she was standing.

'Great God, did ye no see that woman? She's worth any two of us for the work she does,' said Calum Colquhoun.

‘Aye,’ said another, scratching his head, ‘though she has on her the shape of a woman, there’s more of a horse about her,’ he laughed and she saw the others turn and glance at her.

‘She’s a goodly soul,’ she heard John say. ‘I’ll hear no ill of her. There’s none more faithful and hard-working than Susan on this earth.’

‘Aye, Meenister,’ said one of the men, sniggering, ‘and does she serve ye well?’

She would endure their banter and their cruelty. She would submit to it, for there was only one man whose words she cared for and his were always kind. She swatted the flies from around her face and turned from them.

Great drops of rain started to fall again which soon turned to torrents, driving them to seek shelter. Susan’s heart leapt when John called to her to come with him. She ran after the men to a shelter and crept inside with about ten of them where they crouched, listening as the rain hammered on the roofs, finding out holes where the water trickled in. For hours they sat, some trying to sleep propped against the timbers, others curled upon the mud of the floor. Susan watched John sitting cross-legged, reading from a small book, but soon the light was too dim and he closed it and stuffed it into a bundle of his belongings.

‘How are you faring, Susan?’ he said to her quietly, crawling to where she sat hunched close to the edge of the hut.

‘Well enough, sir. I been more comfortable, but I ain’t complainin’, as we all suffers together.’

He nodded at her and smiled. ‘Who would have thought that we would have come to this?’ he said.

‘Well sir, it ain’t too bad really. Ain’t no worse than many a poor beggar what sleeps all their lives under the stars.’ And Susan knew that if all of a sudden she had been offered a dry bed with a feather mattress, a tasty meal of beef and gravy and the safety of a new place for the rest of her life, she would have refused it all and chosen instead to be just where she was, here, at his side.

Two months they had been in their new promised land and Susan was sometimes stabbed with guilt at her pleasure and joy. It was wrongful of her to feel happiness in the midst of all this suffering, the loss of the Missus and so many other poor souls dead, hungry, plagued by heat, flies and rain, worn with toil, marooned in a strange land. Was she a madwoman to suffer this with joy, just to be with him? To work alongside him, to share talk with him, charged her heart with such tenderness, that she could have wished for no more. Only

sometimes, in the hot night as she lay, her skin alive with itching, did she imagine what would never come to pass, that he might lie with her, might enter her with his body as he had entered her soul, that he might give her what she craved in her sinful whorish mind.

But each day brought with it more trials and worries which she could not ignore. She knew the smell of danger. She feared the rage and despair which comes with empty bellies made raw with hard labour. They had already consumed the latest supplies from the ships at the time of the declaration ceremony, so she knew that finding more edible stuff was an urgent task for her each day. There were fish to be had from the ocean, caught with nets and lines and there were shellfish on the rocks and in the shallows. She'd sometimes spent many hours for a poor harvest and a whole day might only bring enough for a dozen mouths when there were thrice as many in need. Some men shot birds and monkeys in the forest, but Captain Drummond had ordered six men flogged who had stolen away from their work and gone hunting instead. The scrawny monkey meat and stringy flesh of a parrot was a change from hard tack and mouldy meal, but filled no bellies. Some pineapples had been found too, high on the branches of trees in the forest, but they were vinegar sharp, hard and unripe and had sent men staggering to the latrine all night long. Susan had tried a few slimy bulb-like fruits, with a smell akin to cat piss and a strange sour-sweet taste, but they had made her sick to her stomach. She preferred to spend her efforts on fishing.

One day by noon, Susan had caught a dozen good crabs and a pile of red scaled fish with curious bulbous heads and returned to the camp to stoke up a fire. The men were still toiling, under the command of Captain Drummond who was shouting orders at them as they hauled heavy guns for the fort across the sand. Master Paterson watched the proceedings for a while before withdrawing to his shelter.

Susan found enough dry wood to get a fire going and filled two iron pots with water. She threw in the gutted fish and then the crabs when the water was bubbling. As the smell drifted up and over the beach, the men raised their heads in her direction. She saw John stand for a moment and then lift his hat to her in acknowledgement of her efforts. Then her mind took to conjuring. She saw herself running to him, embracing him, confessing how she loved him with her whole heart and soul, giving her oath to toil for his good and his comfort, if he would only allow her to be at his side, always and for as long as she breathed the air. She shook her head to clear it of this foolishness and looked out into the blue of the bay. There she spied from the direction of the anchored ships, a boat dipping and rising over the waves, coming towards the shore, a boat with provisions at last, thank the Lord.

A crowd of about twenty landsmen swarmed to the edge of the beach, two reckless devils plunging into the shallows to meet the boat as it drew in closer. There were yells from the oarsmen as the two landsmen clung on to the side of the craft as it rocked and bucked on the waves. Then they heaved out a sack and in their struggle to hold its weight, dropped it into the waves. There were murderous shouts and fists flying. Captain Drummond and two soldiers came running, firing their muskets into the air.

‘Get back you men, or your brains’ll be spilled in the ocean!’ yelled Captain Drummond, ordering the soldiers to seize the thieves.

Seeing the need for a distraction, Susan clanged with all her strength on the side of pot and shouted, ‘Grub’s up, lads!’ glad to see a trail of men coming towards her and the boat beaching safely on the shore. She doled out a ladleful to each man with a cup or vessel and to others pieces into their hands. They all fell ravenously upon the food, tearing the crabs apart with mouths and fingers, cramming the fish till the juices fell from their lips. A box of hard oaten cakes from the supply boat was opened and its contents devoured swiftly too.

‘Damn them,’ Susan overheard Captain Drummond mutter to an officer, Lieutenant Munro a kind, gentlemanly soldier who often spoke with John. Captain Drummond was staring towards the ships anchored in the bay. ‘Keeping their bellies full at our expense. I’ll have heads rolling for this.’

‘Sir, has Master Paterson put our case to the councillors?’ asked Lieutenant Munro.

‘Aye he has, though there’s few will listen to his harping. He has no friends in the Council.’

‘But do they not see the state of the men? We lost four more to fever last week. Is there hope that relief can be sent from Scotland?’

‘Aye, there’s a sloop going to Jamaica this day that will take two of our people with messages for the Company in Edinburgh. There will likely be relief on its way to us within two months. Come, let’s get them back to work.’

Captain Drummond shouted his orders and the men dragged themselves up once more to their labours.

‘Thanks to Mistress Susan,’ said Calum Colquhoun and some of the others joined in his praise.

‘Aye,’ said John. He came closer to her. ‘Thanks for your pains, Susan. Perhaps in spite of everything, we may succeed in our venture. Perhaps one day where we now stand there’ll be a fine town.’

‘Sir, I wishes it most hearty,’ said Susan.

The next day, with spades in hand, the landsmen looked at the sky and felt the wind rising. The great trees in the forest wailed and moaned as though they wearied of the rain as much as the folk did. The sea in the bay churned, tossing the ships at anchor. At first the rain fell as huge drops which stung the scalp, then it came in torrents. All those who laboured at digging and chopping wood ran to the nearest shelters and cowered under the flimsy branches of the roofs, praying they could bear up to another battering. For hours Susan and the men crouched there, great puddles forming in the mud at their feet, the spray of water finding holes in the shelters.

‘God deliver us from this Hell,’ muttered someone, as Susan scooped at the largest pool of water with a bowl, tossing it outside. It was useless she knew, but she could no more be idle than kiss Captain Drummond.

‘Aye and bring us some food or we’ll starve,’ said another.

‘Those on the ships are fine and dry while we rot here,’ came another voice.

‘Take ‘eart, lads,’ said Susan, sensing the impotent anger of the men. ‘tomorrow I’ll get us more fish and we’ll have us a feast.’

‘Amen. I’ll even kiss ye, woman, if ye can do that.’ There was a rough chorus of laughter.

‘Say us a wee prayer, Meenister,’ said someone to John, ‘for we’ve need o’ ony help we can get.’

‘Prayer?’ said Calum Colquhoun, ‘you’d be better off praying to the chatterin’ creatures in the trees, than tae fancy God would take heed o’ ye.’

‘Calum, you may block your ears then,’ said John, though his voice was heavy, his eyes clouded.

She listened as he spoke the words of a psalm. She could hear no life in his voice, no belief and felt a sickening fear in her stomach. ‘Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my cry come unto thee. Hide not thy face from me in the day when I am in trouble: incline thine ear unto me: in the day when I call answer me speedily.....’

On the next day of rain, the new posts of the stockade were washed away. On the following day, four men fell ill with fever which turned their skin yellow and sent them wild and raving, so that they had to be carried to a shelter in the forest, away from the others, to shout and scream in their pain alone. Then came another day of unending rain, this time with a blasting gale and no boats from the ships could reach them. Captain Drummond cursed and

swore from morning till night, driving some of the men to wade up to their knees in mud to put up the fences again. Two of the landsmen fell down with exhaustion and had to be carried back to their shelter.

In the end, Captain Drummond ordered a cask of rum to be opened, as the only relief to be had and men ran from the shelters through the rain to draw off jugs of grog. Susan sat in the shelter with John, Calum and the others of their work group as the jug was passed round, with the damp seeping through to their bones. A slug of liquor might be best for all of them, even John, she thought desperately. For at least it would knock him out of his misery a while. She'd a fancy to take some herself, to fortify herself against the despair which she felt creeping over her, worse than the itching of her skin. She thought about taking off back to her hut which was apart at some distance from the men's, but something kept her with them, as they crouched there together, deep in this sordid gloom. Desperation hung in the air like a dagger waiting to fall.

Calum Colquhoun, after several rounds of the bottle of liquor, grew talkative.

'Tis a mysterious thing God's will, that makes some men prosper, even those who do ill to others. Aye, while some grow fat, others are snuffed out like flies swatted by a rich man's servant.' He took another gulp of the liquor and passed the bottle to John. 'Come, Meenister, tak' a drink, for your God has departed this place. Even you will have need o' better comfort than prayers, do ye no see?'

'No, Calum,' said John, 'I've a weak stomach for drink. I must make do with hope and faith, however hard it be to find them.'

Calum Colquhoun laughed. 'Meenister, you're a poor, sad creature indeed, to have faith in a sham.'

'Aye, perhaps,' said John and Susan feared for him, for she heard the note of despair.

'Haud on, Calum, else ye'll be damned for your blasphemy,' said Davie McBride.

Calum Colquhoun laughed so hearty it turned him to coughing.

'Aye, there was one of our parish was hanged for saying he could read men's destinies in the stars,' said another of the company.

'Poor man,' exclaimed Calum Colquhoun, 'for there's as much truth in the reading o' the stars as in the holy scriptures, the Lord God Almighty and his divine son.'

'But, Calum,' interrupted John, 'man's faith raises him above the beasts. Though his life is hardship and toil, his trust and faith lends him the strength to bear it. No brute beast can know that.'

‘Naw, indeed,’ said Calum, ‘for beasts hae more sense. Above the beasts, ye say? I’m no so sure o’ that. I’ve seen such things at the hands o’ men that the wildest wolf in a’ the world wouldnae have done.’

‘Aye, but for each evil man, there is his counterpart in goodness. I have seen this for myself. I pity you if you have never encountered goodness and compassion in men,’ said John and Susan felt the desperate edge to his voice. She shuffled a little nearer to him.

Calum Colquhoun ignored John’s remark, warming to his cause and gesticulating to the hearers.

‘Och man, the good are gie thin on the ground. Take our illustrious leader Captain Drummond for instance, he that would rule us in this fine new country o’ ours. Our noble commander, vicious bastard, was once an officer o’ the grenadiers. Aye he’s a bad one. I served wi’ him, for all my sins, under Campbell of Glenlyon. We went to pay back the chieftain of the McDonalds for their betrayal. Which of ye here hasnae heard of Glencoe?’

There were mutterings from the company in the shelter and the liquor was passed again. Susan saw John take the cup this time and drain it dry in one gulp. No, she prayed, make him not despair again.

‘Aye, we set upon them all,’ continued Calum Colquhoun, ‘put all men to the sword, burnt all o’ their houses, until all was smouldering cinders around us. Then the bairns and the women were herded together. “Why do these still live?” says Drummond to Glenlyon. “They’re but bairns,” says the commander, and Drummond takes his musket and blows the brains from one wee lad that shrinks at his feet. Now, tell me Meenister, was that God’s will? What sin was on that bairn’s heid that he should have died for it?’

John said nothing, but took another drink at which Calum Colquhoun clapped him on the back.

‘Aye, Meenister, you’d best seek relief through the bottle than trust in God’s will to lend succour, even to the innocent. God doesnae rule men’s lives. Anyone can see it’s blind luck, fate, chance, whatever ye wish tae call it.’

Susan found herself on her feet, though she trembled, she could not hold back, fearful for John and for them all. They were sinking, falling deeper and deeper. ‘You ain’t got no right to speak so harsh and foolish, Master Colquhoun. I don’t know whether there ain’t no God. If there is He ain’t been kind to me, but yer life’s been give to yer. What can you do but live as best yer can? Evil men’ll get their punishment in the end. And you ain’t got no right to take from any what they believes in. What use to scorn them what has hope?’

All eyes were on her and no one spoke. She shrank from them, feeling the heat of her mark on her cheek and not daring to look at John.

‘Aye well, you’ve spirit, lassie, to stand by and protect yer minister and yer God. There’s many a man would like that faithfulness in his woman and many as lacks it,’ said Calum Colquhoun but with no sneering in his voice. ‘Here gie us more o’the grog,’ he shouted and others joined his calls.

Susan sat down again, heart thudding, glad that the passing of the drink had taken attention from her and from John. Suddenly she felt his touch on her arm. ‘Susan, you’re a brave woman and a wise one too. I salute you,’ he said, his words slurred with the grog. ‘Have a drink with me.’

‘I will sir, but just a drop. An’ you shouldn’t ought to take too much.’

‘Aye, you’re right, Susan, you’re always right. But don’t blame me, I pray you, for wanting relief and escape from this?’

‘No, course I don’t blame yer, but there’s some men has a belly can take drink, and you ain’t one o’ them,’ she said sharply. ‘You oughter know that.’

‘Aye I do,’ he said, ‘but Susan there’s nothing else. Think of the suffering, all of who have perished. Will the Company pay recompense to all those widows? All those perished at sea, all the money that people had is sunk, lost in this adventure,’ he continued. ‘Have you not heard the rumours? The Spaniards, they plan to attack us, to drive us from here, if weather and starvation don’t do it first. All these deaths, all for nothing. Is this God’s will? To test our faith? He asks too much of us.’

He drank again deeply from the jug and Susan knew that he could take little more.

‘A new and better life,’ John went on, his speech rambling. ‘Such a noble undertaking. Oh God, what will be the end of all this?’

‘Sir, it’s bad times now, but think, there’s always hope.’ Her heart pounded in panic for him.

‘Susan, what if Calum Colquhoun speaks the truth, like Thomas Aikenhead?’

‘Who’s Thomas Aikenhead?’ said Susan, thinking him raving and wondering whether this dismal mood might be fever as well as the drink talking. But his head had dropped on to his chest and he fell back in a swoon. Susan leaned over him, felt his hot brow and wiped some of the sweat from it, with her hand.

Susan grasped John’s shoulder and shook him. ‘That ain’t right. Don’t talk like that,’ she said in an angry whisper.

‘Susan,’ he said, feeble now, his eyes opening a little, ‘have I done something to offend you?’

‘Yes you has, sir,’ she said, but he made no reply and slumped back again senseless.

She noticed that the rain was lessening now, the drips coming more slowly and a current of fresher air blew through the shelter. She shivered and peeped out at the sky which had cleared and a white moon gave off a pale light. It glowed over the dark shapes of her companions in the shelter, all silent or snoring, overtaken with the sleep of dead drunkenness, slumped against each other. She rose to her feet, feeling a heavy mood weighing on her, hearing the suck of boots in the mud outside the shelter. Four men stood in her way, looking in at her. Their faces were half lit by the moon and she recognised them as diggers from another hut further along the beach. The man at the front drew his hand across his mouth and glanced at his fellows.

‘Weel lassie, it seems that ye’re forsaken,’ he said, his voice slovenly with drink. ‘We’ve come tae keep ye company. Come on lads. Whit are ye waitin’ for? Let’s have a taste of the Meenister’s ugly whore.’

‘I ain’t nobody’s whore!’ she yelled at them, glancing at the lifeless bodies of the men around her and then to either side of the shelter for the best way to escape. Her heart thudded with fury at the intruders, but with a sudden hurt that their accusation was false. The truth struck her, that there could be no sweeter state in the world for her than to be John Wyllie’s whore.

Then she plunged through a gap in the side of the shelter, but saw to her horror that the men had skirted round the hut, moving quickly in spite of the liquour they’d taken. They’d hemmed her in. For a moment she thought of trying to run at them, punch her way free, to break through into the forest, but there would be no hope of any to lend her aid there in the darkness, if they caught up with her again. Luckily, close to her feet on the ground lay a thick fence post. She lunged for it and heavy though it was, wielded it over her shoulder.

‘Come on then. Let’s ‘ave yer!’ she screamed. She faced them, gripping the shaft of timber ready to strike, feeling the power of her fear pounding in her head.

She sized them up, the four of them. She’d be able to take them down, one by one, but if they came at her together she was beaten, like the other time, all those years ago in London. The bile rose into her throat as she remembered the sound of boots in the alley, the whole crowd of them coming after her. She was fast on her feet then, being no more than a girl, but she heard their running steps come closer, then splatter through puddles, the crunching of shoes on gravel and dirt. Five, six, seven of them, she didn’t know. She never

knew either what tripped her that night but she felt herself hit the ground hard and then a heavy body on top of her, crushing her under it.

‘Keep yer ugly face in the dirt,’ cried the one on her back.

‘Do her, the witch!’ shouted another.

Their laughter echoed down the alley. Her head drummed with pain and then something was skewering her innards, splitting her backbone. She must have blacked out after the third or the fourth, though she remembered being turned over, thrown on her back, her head juddering, her skull bouncing on the ground, her gown being ripped, torn up and pulled over her face, smothering her as the next one was upon her and inside her again.

When her little Alfred was born, she had expected a monster, a creature from Hell, spawned as he had been by a brute in the filth. But she loved him from the first and as he grew, with his round pink perfect face, flawless skin, curls of yellow hair, she thought him a gift from God to console and comfort her, to cleanse her soiled and damaged soul, for surely he was an angel. But then why had God been so cruel and taken back his gift? When she found little Alfred cold in his crib, she had done with the Almighty and swore to curse Him for ever in her heart.

This time, they would have to kill her before they could take her and some of them would die first.

‘Get away, you stinking cowards,’ she cried, feeling a murderer’s strength in her arms.

‘Mind her. She’s a strong hoor,’ said one of the men, picking up a spade which lay in the mud.

Susan balanced the wooden stake on her shoulder, eyeing the head of the first man and with a smooth rapid swipe struck her target and sent him plunging into the mud.

‘Bitch from Hell,’ muttered the next of the three, advancing slowly towards her. But then from somewhere behind her, a straight shafted thing with a spike on the end came flying past her head and her attacker yelled and fell flat, as though the legs had been cut from under him. Someone followed behind the weapon, leaping forward, wielding a spade, a small figure wearing a plaid. It was Calum Colquhoun. The last one of the villains saw Calum coming at him, let out a yelp and scampered away into the cover of the forest.

Susan slowly lowered the wooden post in grateful disbelief.

‘Weel Mistress,’ said Calum Colquhoun with a grin. ‘You’ll no be troubled by those rogues any more.’

‘Master Colquhoun, I’m beholden to you,’ she said, her arm going limp as she dropped her weapon. ‘And here’s me thinkin’ you’re too far gone with the grog to stand on your legs.’

‘My stomach’s no stranger tae drink,’ said Calum Colquhoun. ‘It’s the way of a soldier.’

He nodded at her and touched his bonnet, before turning and heading off to the forest in the direction of the latrine. There was no accounting for folk, Susan thought. This ranting fellow, respecter of neither God nor man had come to her aid. She scrambled to her shelter quickly and bedded down as best she could, with her heart still thudding in her chest.

Awaking at dawn, she noticed no sound of rain though heavy, slow drips still fell from the roof of her shelter. Her first thought was for John. She rose and pulled aside the flap of her hut to look out. There was no sign of life nor any sound of movement or voices. She stepped out in the mud, thick as porridge, her boots sucking and sinking into it, to find John lying outside, some way from the hut, drenched by the rain and his own sick.

‘Gawd, look at you,’ she muttered, knowing that he could not hear her, his body heavy and lifeless as she hauled him up and propped him against a tree. ‘Didn’t I tell yer? Might as well talk to one o’ them trees.’ She sighed and stroked his face gently with her hand, then pushed his hair back from his brow. ‘John Wyllie,’ she whispered, ‘what’ll become of you? I don’t know.’ When he stirred she left him in search of fresh water.

She returned to find him coming back to consciousness, groaning, his eyes half open.

‘Better ‘ave a drop of this, sir,’ she said as she held the can to his mouth.

‘Susan, what happened?’ he said holding a hand to his head. ‘Oh God forgive me. What a fool. You warned me and I took no heed. Will you pardon me, Susan – again?’

‘Pardon you, sir?’ she said. ‘Tis your poor stomach you must seek pardon of, I thinks.’

‘Lying in the dirt like a dog,’ he murmured, grasping the tree trunk and trying to rise to his feet. ‘I must go and clean myself of this filth.’

‘Come on sir, lean on me,’ she said, feeling his hand on her shoulder. She watched him walk unsteadily down to the sea and stagger on to his knees at the water’s edge. She ran after him, fearing that he might collapse and fall into the water, but he stood up again and tearing off his soiled shirt waded in, the waves rising up to his waist. She watched the line of his back as he bent and flexed, plunging first his shirt then his head into the water. His shoulders were broad, his arms lean and muscled tight with the heavy labour, his waist narrow. She clutched at herself, feeling the tickling, stirring of her desire, fearing she might

squeal with joy at the sight of him. He doused his head again, shaking his hair out of his eyes then pulled his dripping shirt over his head and walked back slowly up the beach, looking intently at her as he came.

‘Let me wash your shirt proper for you, sir, in fresh water,’ said Susan, as he came near. ‘Salt water ain’t good. Makes yer all itchy.’

He said nothing. His dark eyes searched her face and he reached for her hand which he grasped in his. Susan felt a hot blush on her neck, a prickling of sweat and glanced along the beach.

‘Susan don’t worry. There are no judging eyes upon us now,’ he said. ‘Tell me about last night, I beg you. There was shouting, fighting. Were you in danger? I heard you call out. I tried to rouse myself but my brains were too fuddled with drink. I must have fallen down in the mire where I was this morning. What happened?’

‘Don’t you fret none, sir,’ she replied, her voice careless. ‘Everyone just ‘ad a drop too much and overstepped theirselves. But we showed ‘em, me and that Calum Colquhoun. Strong for a little fella’ ain’t ‘e?’

‘But Susan, what happened? Tell me,’ he said again, pressing her hand gently. ‘Did someone try to attack you?’

‘I told you, it wasn’t nothing, sir. Nothing what we couldn’t fix, not like last time.’

‘Last time?’ He looked at her, puzzled.

‘Long time ago, that was,’ she said, irked that she’d let this slip out. ‘Nah, this time the drunken blackguards got their comeuppance. Full o’ nonsense and drink, that’s all,’ she said, reluctantly withdrawing her hand from his, but fearing that someone would emerge from one of the huts, as the sun was already hot in the sky.

‘Susan, forgive me. I was useless to you when you needed me,’ he said, his voice bitter, like she’d never heard it before and it frightened her. ‘What a fool I am, a simple fool. I think I can calm men’s violence and desperation with scripture; what a damfool notion. Hold back evil by calling for righteousness, how absurd and futile! When men are sunk so low, to such baseness as this what can be done to protect innocence but greater violence? There’s no hope.’

He started walking on up the beach and Susan ran at his side, catching his arm.

‘Sir, you ain’t foolish. Beating up folks is only for when things is desperate. Don’t despair, please, sir. If you didn’t have no hope and no faith in goodness then I couldn’t live no more,’ she said.

He said nothing, but turning to her, drew her hand through his arm and they walked back up the beach together.