

Chapter 28

London March 1698

‘Are you certain ‘twas he, the son of Nicolas Payne?’ said David Fletcher, taking Isobel’s hand in his.

‘Aye, there was no mistaking him, the impudent puppy. I’d recognise him amongst thousands,’ she replied, still trembling from her flight and the shock of the encounter. She sank into the chair by the fire.

‘But, lassie, do you know for sure that he saw you?’ said her mother.

‘He stared hard as I passed him. He knew me. It was Francis Payne, no other, but I ran from him as fast as I could.’

‘You were not followed?’ enquired her father.

Isobel shook her head, as she recalled the only aftermath, the raucous shouts of the young men behind her as she hastened away from them, not daring to look back.

‘Have no fear, Isobel,’ said her father, ‘I will come with you each day to your work. If either that man or his son dare approach, he will first have to deal with me. Am I not a figure to be feared? Surely even Nicolas Payne would not strike a crippled man.’

Isobel looked up at him and laughed at his mock martial pose. He smiled back at Isobel and she rose to embrace him, feeling his paralysed, useless arm at his side.

‘How Thomas would have liked an encounter with that stuffed up pair,’ said David Fletcher. ‘He would have talked them into a corner both.’

‘Aye Father, he would,’ said Isobel, with a sad sweet recollection of her brother, her friend and protector. Jean Fletcher came to them, slipping her arm round her husband’s waist. For a moment they were silent in their shared dedication to the memory of Thomas.

‘But Master Payne cannot find us here, in this city surely?’ said Jean Fletcher.

‘Well, in all the throng of people and all these streets, he’ll be hard pressed,’ replied David Fletcher.

Isobel caught her father’s eye and in that brief moment, they exchanged their unspoken fear of the possibilities. Nicolas Payne was an arrogant, self-important man who would have been much angered by the disappearance of his betrothed in such an ignominious way. To lose face among his brethren in the Guild would be a humiliation to him. He had no doubt boasted freely about his conquest of a fresh young bride. Isobel knew also of his

power and influence among those of their craft. Her greatest worry was now whether this influence might reach as far as London.

Over the next weeks and months, since her sighting of Francis Payne, in her more optimistic moments, Isobel dismissed the encounter as insignificant. Nicolas Payne would be sure to have found a suitable woman to wive him and must by now have banished all thoughts of her. But in her more vulnerable hours of wakefulness, she was filled with dread at the memory of his insistent hands, his sticky breath, his desire to own her, the promise she had made to him. She sometimes woke with the sensation that he lay beside her. In these frightened dark moments of panic, she almost resolved to beg her father to let them return to Edinburgh where they would be further beyond his reach. But in the morning, her fears seemed merely foolish weakness and she determined to think no more on him or his unpleasant son.

Nevertheless, she and her father took the darkest and most obscure of the alleys and backstreets to Ivy Lane and Monsieur Padeloup's workshop each day. She cloaked herself for her return in a thick grey shawl pulled over her head to hide her face, sometimes assuming a bent posture, as though she inhabited the body of an old woman. She would arrive early at the workshop and leave under the safe cover of darkness. Sometimes, Isobel wondered whether it would be wise to confide in her employer or Madame Padeloup, but she held back. She would not for the world have them think ill of her. If they knew her whole story, they might judge her immoral and unfit. But Monsieur Padeloup, in spite of his reserved and formal demeanour and Isobel's attempts to conceal her anxious state, revealed himself to be an astute and sensitive observer.

'Mademoiselle Fletcher, you are not happy I think,' he said one day and Isobel blushed, suddenly struck by the possibility that she might have produced inferior work and that he was displeased.

'Monsieur Padeloup,' she said, 'you have found a fault in my work?'

'No, no, Mademoiselle, you know how I esteem your skills. No, it is not that at all. You seem to me not quite happy. Is it your father perhaps? Is he ill? Or perhaps it is affairs of the heart? Is there a young man?'

Isobel felt a flood of relief and gratitude, that he should be concerned for her welfare rather than her workmanship.

'Monsieur,' she replied, 'I thank you for your concern, but I'm quite well and so are my parents. I'm sorry that there has been something amiss in my manner. I'll try to make sure that private thoughts do not interfere with my work. Please pardon me.'

‘My dear,’ he said, ‘I would hope that if you find yourself troubled, you would seek our aid.’

Isobel, deeply touched by his kindness, found herself compelled to tell him about Nicolas Payne and her sighting of his son in London.

‘So, I have a fear that he will come and seek me out, here perhaps,’ she said as she finished her account.

‘Ma chère Isobel,’ said Monsieur Padeloup. ‘I think this man’s powers cannot extend to this city. I am, of course, most happy to be your protector. Do not worry.’ With a nod and a smile he retreated to the office and his papers.

She took to her work gratefully, for here as always was her respite in times of trouble or anxiety. She picked up the sheaf of pages of the volume she was to stitch. It was a collection of the sonnets of Shakespeare, one of her favourite works. This was to be bound in a soft light goatskin cover. She could not resist pausing to read some of the text and carefully turned the thick leaves, devouring the words of passion and love, until she came to one which brought tears to her eyes.

*How like a winter hath my absence been
From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!
What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!
What old December’s bareness every where.....*

This expression of the pain of absence summoned thoughts of John. The renewal of her distasteful memories of Nicolas Payne only strengthened her conviction that there was only one man she could ever love. Her love of John had so many parts: his tender actions and words to her, his attention, respect and admiration of her. He wanted her for who she was and prized her talent and interests as she did his modesty, his intelligence, his liveliness, suppressed by the strictures of his upbringing, which she could have set free. And he was so comely in face and body, though without a hint of vanity or self-regard. How she yearned too for his caress, his kiss, to reveal herself to him, to give herself to him. No other man could ever stir her passions so. There was no cure for this, no answer. She would live forever with this absence in her heart.

The early summer brought flowers to gardens and parks, blossom to trees, bright weather, less smoke and the lifting of Isobel’s spirits. The threat of discovery by Nicolas Payne loomed less in her thoughts day by day. Her father too doubted that the bookbinder would

engage in a pursuit after this passage of time. Isobel was glad to see that her parents were more settled and content. Her mother took in sewing for a dressmaker's shop not far from their lodgings. Her father had practised writing with his left hand to achieve a neat script and was employed as an occasional law writer for a company in Newgate Street. He had also met some fellow Scots in a coffee house one day and would go there each week to enjoy the conversation and banter of expatriates.

David Fletcher would return with news and occasionally pamphlets and broadsheets. Once, with a flush upon his cheek, he beckoned Isobel to join him at the fireside to look upon an article which he had come across that day.

'Look at this,' he said. 'It is a tract written by a number of churchmen and scholars from the University here in this city, about the need for toleration in religious practices.' His eyes quickly scanned the text. 'It mentions the infamous case in Edinburgh of Thomas Aikenhead, which caused much outrage here in London at the time, "the shameful and tragic consequences of intolerant minds and obscene laws...There can be no mark of savagery greater than denying a man's right to think and speak according to his conscience and belief, if it harms no one....."' So, it seems now that the Privy Council and even the Lord Advocate in Scotland have agreed the law must change.'

'Aye,' said Isobel, 'that is good, but all too late for Thomas.'

Her father filled his pipe and sank back into his chair as Isobel sat, head bent, examining the pamphlet. 'Aye, too late for Thomas,' he said, 'but you were right, lassie. The mood is changing.'

One sunny day, Isobel came later to the shop, as she had been on an errand for Monsieur Padeloup. The Frenchman looked up from his work when she entered and smiled.

'Good morning, my dear. You have made good purchases?'

'Yes sir,' she replied. 'I think you will be pleased with these. She brought him the small parcel wrapped in paper and laying it on the bench unrolled it to reveal two small silver hinged clasps to secure a book cover.

'Beautiful. Perfect. These will finish the work admirably,' replied her employer examining the clasps and then suddenly looking up at her. 'Ah Isobel, I forget something. There is something for you.'

Monsieur Padeloup reached down to the lower shelf of the bench and produced a small nosegay of flowers.

When Isobel looked puzzled, he smiled. ‘No, my dear child. They are not from me. I think you have an admirer. Look, here is the note that the young man left.’

‘Young man?’ said Isobel, in a sudden flash of fear that it might have been Francis Payne masquerading as a suitor.

‘Do not worry. He is a young London gentleman, a customer of our shop in fact.’

Isobel took the items, filled with curiosity about the sender. She opened the note and blushed as she read it.

Ave Maria

Lane

London

Monday

My Dear Mistress Fletcher,

You may not remember me and it is presumptuous of me to assume that you would do so for a moment, after our brief meeting last week. My name is Samuel Needham, of ‘Needham’s Booksellers to the Gentry’. My happy meeting with you was on the occasion of my visit to Monsieur Padeloup’s establishment on the business of ordering bindings for twelve copies of ‘The Book of Common Prayer’. You graciously attended to my request and I am very grateful for your attention.

I would be delighted if you would accept this small posy as a manifestation of my esteem for you. May I also beg to seek your father’s permission to call upon you again.

Your humble servant

SN

Isobel carefully folded the note and put it in her pocket, casting a quick glance at her employer who she was glad to see was now absorbed in his work. She did remember Samuel Needham, as a pleasant, polite young man of above twenty, dressed smartly in the fashion of the day for many a London gentleman, with a neat curled wig, a Brandenburg coat and a cane, trying hard it seemed to be the sophisticated man of business. She was flattered but mildly concerned that her inevitable rejection of his overtures should protect both his pride and his feelings. But as Isobel walked home that evening, she pondered on this decision.

It was true that Samuel Needham stirred no strong feelings in her, as John had done from the moment of their first meeting. But what good did it serve to compare other men

with him, she thought, for she would never find his equal again. Perhaps in her artless passion she imagined him to be too perfect. Besides, she would never see John again. She knew this in her heart, no matter how much she clung to vain and flimsy hopes. There would be no reply to her letters. That night, when alone, she opened her box and took out his portrait. She had looked on it so many times before, in times of happiness and of despair. This time, after gazing for some time at his face, she rolled up the paper again, wrapped it in a cloth and buried it at the bottom, under her linen, clothes and other possessions and hid it from her sight.

In the middle of the night, she woke as if suddenly shaken by the hand of someone eager to speak to her on a matter of great import. With wakefulness came the same disturbance of mind which had troubled her in the day. She was young and had her life ahead. Was this to be spent in mournful celibacy and longing? Was it constancy or folly to deny herself a life with a kind and amiable man, because he did not rouse in her the passion which she had felt for John? She had been ready to marry a repugnant man when necessity forced her. How much better was it then to contemplate a union with a man who seemed in every way his opposite? Sleep came at last once she knew what course she should take.

Jean Fletcher was agitated, so much that she clattered the dishes, scraped the legs of chairs on the floor and sighed as she found a stain in the tablecloth.

‘Mother, it is not royalty calling on us today. Why all this fuss?’ said Isobel who was knitting in the corner.

Her mother glared at her as though she had uttered a profanity. ‘He will judge us, your Master Needham, by our state. God knows there’s nothing wrong with plainness, but he must see that we’re respectable. We’ve not entertained guests in London. London people do things differently, I’m sure.’

‘Wife, give yourself peace,’ said David Fletcher.

‘And us too,’ said Isobel, ‘for Samuel Needham must take us as he finds us.’

‘Isobel, I can’t fathom you. Why do you not bother? A handsome young man like him?’

The bell of the street door clanged below and Isobel rose, gesturing to her mother to be seated.

‘Right mother. I’ll welcome him in as best I can.’ She exchanged a quick smile with her father as she left the room.

Samuel stood on the threshold, a bright posy of anemones edged with fronds of fern in his hand. He smiled broadly, his face bright with pleasure and friendliness. ‘Mistress Fletcher,’ he said bowing extravagantly.

Isobel nearly laughed but could not prevent a blush rising to her cheeks. ‘Master Needham, you’re most welcome,’ she said and ushered him in. He followed her up the stairs to their apartments and found her parents seated, composed and comfortable, at the fireside in their kitchen which also served as a parlour. Isobel was glad that her mother seemed more at ease, her father being his usual affable self.

Their talk was easy and pleasant. Samuel told them of his family, his mother and brothers and sisters. Then he spoke of father’s business and how hard he had worked from nothing to establish it.

‘I’m pleased to say we are flourishing now and have two people in our employ,’ he said.

‘Master Needham,’ said David Fletcher, ‘would you care to smoke a pipe?’

‘Sir, thank you kindly. I would like that immensely,’ the young man replied with energy.

Some time later, Samuel announced that he must take his leave. ‘Thank you for your kind hospitality,’ he said, rising from his seat. ‘I have greatly enjoyed our conversation.’ He bowed politely to David and Jean Fletcher.

‘You must call again, Master Needham,’ said Jean Fletcher, nodding at him and returning his smile. ‘See our guest to the door, Isobel.’ Isobel found his hat and cane, which he took from her, his eyes fixed on her face. She turned and led him downstairs.

‘I’m mighty glad to have made the acquaintance of your parents,’ said Samuel Needham as they stood at the doorway to the street. ‘They are splendid people. I only wish I had thanked them for bringing to London the most beautiful star in the north.’

‘Your flattery is ridiculous, Master Needham,’ Isobel said, laughing.

‘But, Mistress Fletcher, Isobel, this is no vain flattery,’ he said, looking hurt and taking her hand. ‘You are the loveliest woman I have ever seen, though in your plain, modest dress you do not show your beauty to its best advantage.’

‘Master Needham,’ she said decisively, but not unkindly, for she could see that he meant well by his remark, ‘I am happiest in plain dress as befits my employment and my station.’

He looked a little disappointed, but smiled earnestly and kissed her hand. ‘You need no embellishment, Isobel, for your beauty enhances even the dullest clothes. When may I next see you? May I come to your place of work tomorrow, in the evening?’

‘I should be pleased to see you, Master Needham.’

‘Samuel, please call me Samuel, or even Sam,’ he stated releasing her hand. ‘I will not sleep for thinking of you.’

Isobel watched him walking away, his cane in hand and a slight swagger in his stride. She wondered what she felt for him. Though he was comely in his appearance, attentive and sometimes entertaining in his discourse, she felt no quickening of her heart, no flush of excitement and no desire to be more in his company than their arranged encounters provided. But there was no reason why she should not accept his attentions. There was no discord between them. He was an easy and pleasant companion.

On returning to the upstairs apartments, Isobel found her mother in a hearty mood, bustling about clearing away the dishes from their recent guest’s visit.

‘Well, Isobel, your Master Needham pleases me well, a nice respectable young man,’ she said. ‘His father has a good thriving business as well. Do you find him agreeable, lassie?’

‘Yes, mother, I do,’ Isobel said, feeling irked at her mother’s invasive curiosity, knowing what was behind it. ‘But I hardly know him at all.’

‘David, did he please you, our young guest?’ her mother asked, though her father was engrossed in reading the latest pamphlet from the coffee house.

‘Aye, what is it, Jean?’ he said absently.

‘Och, husband, go back to your reading,’ she said. ‘Do you not care about the young men that court your daughter?’

‘Mayhap Isobel may need a longer acquaintanceship with the man, to form her own opinion, wife,’ he said without looking up.

Next day Monsieur Padeloup was at the house of a customer and Isobel was in sole charge of the workshop. At her bench, she was sunk deeply in concentration on a delicate gold tooled decoration for a volume of psalms for the betrothal of Lady Henrietta Sempill. The binding was of red morocco leather, with a vibrant sheen and she was tooling a fine fan shaped pattern beneath the family crest. She was lost completely in the work, her eyes set on the perfect execution of this piece. A sudden light cough alerted her to the presence of someone in the workshop who must have come in so quietly that she did not hear. She looked up and

saw that it was Samuel, standing hat in hand at about ten paces from her bench, watching her with a rapt expression on his face. 'Isobel, forgive me. I startled you.'

'Samuel, good day. I was engrossed. Forgive me, but it's an important piece. Would you care to look at it, though it's not quite complete?'

'I regret, Isobel, I do not have the leisure,' Samuel replied. 'I come only to give my apologies for this evening. I have to attend to some urgent business for my father. Will you forgive me, for the unreliable rogue that I am? May I come tomorrow instead for I couldn't bear a day without seeing you?'

'Of course, Samuel, it's of no matter. I'll be pleased to see you tomorrow instead,' she said, noting a greater seriousness in his demeanour.

He smiled and reached for her hand. 'Don't worry, Isobel. I hope that some time, not too far from the present, you will have no need to labour like this.' He drew her hand to his lips and kissed it softly. 'Isobel, you know my heart, I think.'

She blushed but said nothing to him, instead bidding him a friendly goodbye. She watched his figure pass the window and turning again to her work, smiled to herself but could not settle to it again so readily. Her concentration had been broken, and she felt a little discomfited by Samuel's remarks. She knew what he intended and felt no strong response either for or against it. He said she knew what was in his heart, but did he wish to know hers? Were he to ask for some affirmation of her affection for him, what could she say, that she liked him, found his company pleasing, was flattered by his attentions? She set aside the delicate work and instead gathered up some materials for the next job, a simpler project which would allow more freedom for her thoughts as she worked. At this point, however, Madame Padeloup appeared through the doorway adjoining the workshop, with a small tray, asking if Isobel would care to take coffee with her this morning, which she frequently did when her husband was from home.

'Thank you, Madame, I would like that greatly for I have been interrupted just now.'

'Yes, I saw the young man, Master Needham,' said Madame Padeloup.

Isobel cleared a space upon one of the benches and they sat comfortably together. Their talk was of trivial everyday things, though Isobel wondered if today Madame Padeloup was quite well, for her voice and manner lacked their usual briskness and vigour. Suddenly the clock above their heads struck the hour and Isobel heard the Frenchwoman utter a small gasp.

'Madame, what ails you? Are you unwell?' Isobel said leaving the stool upon which she was perched and coming to her.

‘Non, ma chère, not ill,’ she said holding a small lace handkerchief to her face to cover the sign of her momentary discomposure. ‘Only today. It is a day to think of her.’

‘Madame, if it will ease your mind to speak of what it is that troubles you, I will gladly listen with an open heart and no intent to repeat your words to a living soul.’

‘Ma chère, you are so kind. God sent you here, I know it, to make it not so bad for us.’

Isobel said nothing but touched Madame Padeloup gently on the arm and did not press her further. The Frenchwoman sighed deeply and her face resumed its expression of calm and control.

‘There, I am strong now,’ she said, taking Isobel’s hand. ‘I could not tell you before about Francine. But today I have a need to speak of her. Have you the leisure to listen?’

Isobel nodded.

‘She was beautiful, so beautiful and she was our only one, our only daughter,’ said Madame Padeloup. ‘We had other children, Jacques and I but it was not God’s will to let them live. Francine was our little jewel. The young men, you know, they were soon seeing her and falling in love. It was our fault. Her father bought her anything, rich gowns and jewellery and she would go walking about the parks with me and her cousins. We are not of the gentry. We are just hard-working people, but Jacques, he wanted more for her.

‘My husband worked with his brother and they had much good business. They had commissions from royalty, from bishops and from the nobility. They became so well-known all over Paris. Armand, my brother-in-law’s nephew, a young man with good connections, heir to a prosperous paper-making business was the ideal husband for her. What better way to make us rich, for our family fame to rise in the city? It was all arranged. They were to be married. He was a good young man and Francine, she seemed to find him agreeable enough.

‘But then, when she was seventeen, she fell in love. He was a poor musician, a violinist she saw in the Parc des Princes. Oh he was handsome and had talent, but no modesty about his station and she was so wilful. It was no good. We could do nothing to stop them. He declared his love and came to ask Jacques if he could marry her. Jacques was very angry and told him she was already betrothed and ordered him to go away from her for ever. And then he discovered something about this young man. It was very bad. He was a Jew. She begged, my little Francine begged her father to let her marry him. She said she would die if she could not be with him, but it was impossible. We could not permit it with a Jew,’ and here Madame Padeloup stopped, her breath coming quickly.

‘So they ran away together and were married. They went to Rome and then to many places in the empire, Vienna, Budapest, where he could find work playing music. She wrote to us, many letters, to beg our forgiveness and ask for us to receive her again at home in Paris. Jacques would not talk of her and forbade me to say her name. I knew in his heart he was very miserable and missed her terribly. Then one day we had a letter from Venice. She was with child and she begged to come home to Paris for her confinement. She said that she and Sébastien, her husband, were very happy though not wealthy, but that they longed to see us. I pleaded with Jacques and in the end he agreed that they should come to us. I sent a letter straight away and we waited for news.

‘Two months passed and there was nothing. I could not endure the waiting. What had happened? Why did she not write? Eventually, a messenger came, on horseback all the way from Avignon. I do not know how I stayed alive after this message. It was from Sébastien. Francine was very ill. The baby had been born early, too small and too weak, during their journey. The little child had lived only for a day and now Francine had a fever and the doctors had little hope. She asked for us to go to her.

‘We set off that very day and travelled all day, all night and another day to arrive at the inn in Avignon. We were too late. She had died that morning. We found Sébastien by her. Our grief was great but his was greater. He could not be consoled and we saw then that he had loved and cherished her just as we had done, only more. Our selfish pride, our ambitions, our wicked judgments had driven them away. We had not recognised their love and his devotion to her, poor Sébastien. So that is why we came to London. We wanted to go from the place where we had known and caused such grief. So now you know our story.’

By now Isobel could feel the tears pricking in her eyes and saw that Madame Padeloup’s lip was trembling. ‘Madame, I am sorry to have caused you to renew your grief.’

‘Ma chère, no, I am recovered. But today, it is her anniversaire and that is why I am sad. I love to see your face, for it is so like my daughter’s.’

After some moments of quiet between them, Madame Padeloup’s tone changed. ‘Listen to me, Isobel,’ and she grasped her hand with some urgency. ‘Though Francine was lost to us, she was loved so well and by so good a man that this comforts me and soothes my guilty heart. Your parents are good people. But I know, more than anyone, of the dangers of what parents can do to their children. I know too it is the way of the world for people to marry for money, for property. But not you. You must follow the feelings of your heart. Ma chère, I know I should not advise you. God forgive me, I did not counsel my own daughter well. But this Master Samuel Needham, is he really for you?’

‘Madame, I—, Isobel could not trust herself to answer.

‘I do not see that brightness in your eye. I saw it in Francine. Have you ever loved a man?’

‘Madame,’ said Isobel. ‘There was someone I loved dearly but he is gone for ever?’

‘Dead?’

‘He may be. I do not know.’

‘Isobel, you must listen to your heart.’

‘I do, I do, Madame,’ said Isobel, ‘But what good if my heart yearns for that which it can never have?’

She shook her head. ‘I do not know, ma chère. But I think the man you marry must truly touch your heart.’

When Isobel returned home that night, her mother greeted her with unusual eagerness. Isobel knew that there was something of import to relate.

‘We have a good piece of beef tonight, lassie. I had it of the best butcher in the Fleshmarket this morning. It’s fit for a queen.’

David Fletcher was quiet over their supper and Isobel, feeling little hunger, wished for the meal to be done so that the bubble of expectation could be burst. So as she and her mother cleared away, she could restrain herself no longer.

‘Mother, will you say what’s in your mind? Has something happened?’

‘Isobel, come let’s sit,’ said her mother, taking her by the arm and leading her to the fireplace beside her father.’

‘We had a visit today from a young man. I think you know who. It was Master Samuel Needham. He came to ask for your hand, Isobel. He wants to marry you.’

Isobel, though she had guessed the news, was still struck with the shock of it and for a moment could not speak.

‘Well, what do you think, lassie. Is he not a braw man?’ said Jean Fletcher impatiently, unable to mask her disappointment at Isobel’s lack of response.

‘Mother, I don’t know him well,’ said Isobel hesitating. ‘I like him, it’s true. He’s amiable and courteous but —’

‘Isobel, you’ll get no better offer than this. He’s a good young man with prospects, in a respectable way of business. He loves you. He swears he loves you more than his life. What else could you seek?’

‘Mother, I don’t think I want to be married,’ she said struggling to control her voice.

‘Isobel! You’ll drive me to distraction. What is it that you want?’

‘Hush wife,’ said her father, reaching out to Isobel and taking her hand. ‘Don’t fret, lassie. We’ll never make you go against your will.’

‘David, you said yourself that he’d make a good husband for her,’ said her mother, jumping up from her chair. ‘What’s to become of her if she does not marry? When she’s too old to work, if she has no work, who’ll keep her? Answer me that. She cannot be a bookbinder for ever. David, tell her.’

Isobel looked at her father who shifted in his chair.

‘What is it, Father?’

‘Lassie, I fear the man, Nicolas Payne has come to London. I saw him leaving Mistress Farley’s Coffee shop today. There were others in his company. Forgive me, lassie for I should have pursued him and accosted him, for then I might have ended this for good and all.’

‘Don’t you see, Isobel, the man has come to torment you with the broken promise. He will not give up,’ said her mother, her voice strained.

‘Yes, I see it plainly, Mother,’ said Isobel feeling a cold chill upon her. ‘If I marry Samuel Needham, I will be free of Nicolas Payne for ever.’

Chapter 29

May 1698

Darien

‘Heave, damn you!’ bellowed Captain Drummond, ‘Lily-livered rogues! Damn you to Hell if you don’t shift it!’

John felt his feet slide in the mud, his balance slipping from him, the burning of the rope in his grip, his back straining, his spine ready to snap. Calum’s face was red and drenched with sweat while the other two men hauling the gun added no power, being limp and near collapse, one already on his knees. Captain Drummond had ordered six more heavy guns to be dragged up to the fort. It could not be done that day, for all the commander’s threats and curses.

‘God save me,’ cried one of the men collapsing on his face in the mud, the wheels of the cannon sliding back a foot or two. Captain Drummond strode quickly to him, staff in hand and swung it at the half-conscious man, landing a blow across his back, as if to a recalcitrant mule.

John loosed his grip on the rope as he saw the wheels of the gun stuck fast in the thick mud, the fallen man now motionless. Calum eased off too, slumping over the barrel.

‘Sir,’ John said, his breath coming in bursts, ‘let us have a pause, a rest and we’ll resume. The men are too weary and weak for this. Let us take water, at least.’

Captain Drummond recoiled as though hit by a blow.

‘What?’ he said, his eyes bulging.

‘Sir, we’re close to collapse and starving,’ John said. ‘These men work on empty bellies. We’ve had nothing today but one handful of dried peas.’

Captain Drummond raised his fist, as if to strike John, but instead punched at the air.

‘Snivelling wretches. My God, it’s no wonder that our venture’s failing, with these weaklings and the likes of you whining on their behalf. Do you think there’s choice in the matter? We must work while there’s no rain.’

John saw that Captain Drummond was as desperate in his own way as the men he drove like beasts. But his desperation was madness and these men, his comrades, would be broken or die unless John could prevail. He cared little for his own safety now, like one who tumbles from a height and awaits the pain of the landing.

‘Sir, we have another man dead today. Two more have fever. In God’s name, let them rest for an hour or two. They need food and water. There must be some respite.’

‘Hell fire,’ shouted Drummond, ‘Spineless bastards, all of you.’

‘Sir–,’ John tried to continue.

‘You craven coward. Who are you to set yourself up against me? If you’re a minister of the Kirk you should be raising the spirits of the men with acts of prayer and faith to endure.’

‘Sir, I’m no minister, nor can I argue the power of faith to men in agony. You ask too much.’

‘Then rot in Hell, all of you. You deserve no better than to go snivelling to your graves. If I had only been granted a band of true men.’

‘Empty bellies break the strongest of spirits–’

‘Damn your soul!’ The blow from Captain Drummond’s fist smashed into John’s cheekbone and nose and felled him. A few moments later, he was crawling in the mud, dragging himself from the slime back up on to his feet. He stood up again as straight as he could, feeling blood trickling down his face. He had never risen to face his father after the first blow, but he would stand up against this tyrant now, though he be struck dead in doing so. The commander wielded his weapon for another strike, but John held his gaze steady and with his sleeve wiped the blood from his face.

‘Only God can damn my soul, sir,’ he said, quietly. ‘We will rest now, take the sick to the shelters and start our labours again in good time. That’s an end on it.’

John saw something flicker in the commander’s eye and he lowered his staff slowly to the ground, glancing at the bedraggled men.

‘It will be done by sunset or you will answer for it,’ he said, pointing at John then turning his back and striding away towards the palisade of the fort.

‘Well Meenister, our thanks tae ye for this respite,’ said Calum Colquhoun, dropping the rope.

The others murmured agreement and some fell down straight on the spot where they had been toiling, as they had scarce the strength to move further.

‘’Tis little enough, Calum,’ replied John, realising bitterly that he had only succeeded in delaying their suffering. ‘Come help me with this man.’

Together they pulled the fallen man to his feet and carrying him between them, started the descent from the hill where the fort stood to the beach and the shelters. John saw Susan running to meet them.

‘Gawd, not another,’ she said, eyeing the unconscious figure slung between John and Calum.

‘There’s two others lying sick o’ the fever in your hut.’ Then noticing John’s bleeding face exclaimed, ‘Sir, you’re hurt. What happened?’

‘He took blows on behalf o’ us,’ said Calum, while Susan peered with concern at John.

‘It’s of no account,’ John said, ‘others are more sorely in need. Susan, can you bring water to those up there? And is there any food at all? Some may not last till sunset unless they eat.’

‘Only some of that meal full of maggots, but I’ll boil it up again and scoop little devils off of the top,’ she said going ahead of them to the huts.

That night the rain began again, great punishing drops thundering on the roofs of the shelters where they all cowered. The drink which was plentiful had knocked most into oblivion so that only John was awake, having sworn to take no more grog. Restless and sweating, the bruise on his face hot and blistering with pain, he hoped that this was not the first sign of fever, he being one of the few so far who had escaped it. His gut was aching with hunger, his bowels twisting with the effects of some unripe fruit he had eaten, so he rose to go to the latrine.

Stumbling into the dark, wet night, the moon obscured with heavy cloud, he made his way to the wooded place which screened the latrine from the huts, though the smell led him there with ease. Some others stalked there among the trees, silent like ghosts not men. He would probably die in this place, taken by fever like so many and lie in a grave alongside better and worse men than he. He felt no bitterness. Why should his life should be charmed or his existence placed above others? God’s providential plan was no more than a fiction. The salvation of his soul a meaningless chimera. There was nothing to do now, but to ease the final days or weeks of his fellow sufferers. He could speak up for them, make protests and plead with their leaders, or offer any comfort of which he was capable. To do anything else would deny his humanity, which in the end was all he possessed. But what comfort could there be in such a place? How could men place their hope in a god who had abandoned them? As he picked his way back from the latrine through the trees, he heard someone call.

‘Who’s there? State your name.’ There was the glint of a sword.

John recognized the voice of Lieutenant James Munro and called to him.

‘God save you, John,’ said Lieutenant Munro. ‘You will keep watch with me tonight?’

‘Aye, gladly,’ said John, ‘for I cannot sleep.’

‘ ‘Tis only the drink that will take me off,’ said the soldier.

‘Pity it can’t keep people alive.’

‘No, but pray to God there will be relief soon. If we can only survive this hardship, who knows, there may be a colony after all.’

‘Aye, it would be a bitter thing, to know we had suffered all this for nothing,’ said John, remembering his dreams of a school, a town and a new country.

Weariness dragged at him. Months of toil and only a miserable cluster of leaking huts to show for it. A half-built fort with a few guns poised to defend this sorrowful settlement but no men with the strength to fire them against an enemy.

‘There are rumours aplenty,’ said the officer, shifting uneasily as he stood. ‘The Spaniards have a new governor at Cartagena along the coast. There’s word they plan to drive us from this place. I’ve seen some of our own commanders making ready to depart.’

‘What of the Council?’ asked John with a flash of shame to feel hope at the thought of departure.

‘There’s some speak for it and some against, though it’s Paterson and Drummond would have us here till the end. Pity help us, if God will not.’ Lieutenant Munro’s voice was weary and weak and he slumped heavily with his back against a tree.

‘Is it fever?’ said John, unable to see his friend’s face clearly in the darkness.

‘Aye, I thought it had passed, but I’ve an ache in my head like it will split in two,’ said the officer. ‘But there’s no man escaped it. I wonder if I had but the strength I would strip all signs of soldiering away and run off into the forest. I’m sick to my soul of serving others, John. What I’d give to be free of duty.’

‘But can anyone truly be free?’ said John, crouching down by his friend. ‘Aren’t we all bondsmen of a sort? We’re all bound by conscience or promises, affections, employment, fear of God. There’s no life without some halter of our own or others’ making to yoke us to duty.’

‘Aye you’re right, John,’ said the Lieutenant with a grim laugh. ‘And perhaps it’s best to bear the familiar yoke than to throw it off and take a chance with the beasts of the forest.’

The next day the rains came again and poured without cease. The men in the shelters stirred, rose, stumbled into the forest one at a time, to relieve themselves and returned hollow-eyed and slumped again on the floor, with hardly the energy to exchange words. No fire could be lit and they shared some mouldy meal, having only one mouthful each. Susan brought them a

posset of thin broth made of green leafy plants, tasteless but providing some temporary satisfaction in the chewing.

‘Where’s the grog?’ growled someone in the shelter. ‘I’ll die if I cannae have a sup.’

‘Aye, we’re all tae die in this Hellhole anyway,’ replied another.

‘Oh God, sweet Jesus.’ Someone was weeping in the corner.

John went to where Calum Colquhoun had lain motionless for most of the day and knelt at his side.

‘Calum, stir yourself.’

The man made no movement. John grasped his arm and shook him, fearful and angry. Did he think that Calum had died just to spite him? In response, Calum slowly rolled over, his face greenish and sweating.

‘Good day to ye, Meenister,’ he whispered, his voice rasping. ‘Leave me be, just for a while.’

John looked for Susan and beckoned to her to bring water.

‘Come man, rouse yourself. Here take this.’ John nodded his thanks to Susan and together they helped raise Calum up so that he could drink.

‘Leave me be, the both o’ ye,’ he mumbled. ‘Can ye no leave a dying man in peace.’

‘Dying of too much grog, I shouldn’t wonder,’ interrupted Susan, re-filling the cup from the flagon she held.

John was relieved to see that Calum sat up and took the water from the cup that Susan offered.

‘This rain cannot last forever,’ said John, looking out at the sheet of water flowing from the roof of the shelter.

Calum Colquhoun drank greedily and then looked at John again. ‘Oh aye?’ he said, his face contorting in an attempt at a smile. ‘Strange we should think o’ Hell as a place wi’ burning fiery furnaces, when in truth it’s sodden wet, drowning in mud.’ He tried to laugh, but instead broke into a wheezing cough and sank back to the ground. He pulled his plaid around him and curled up again.

The man beside Calum lay without movement. John, exchanging a glance with Susan, leaned over and touched his face, finding it cold as stone. Without any further talk, John and Susan together lifted the corpse out of the shelter. They bore him between them to the edge of the forest and struggled to gouge a trench in the mud to bury him. John bowed his head and spoke mechanically from the scriptures. His mind was elsewhere, his words drowned by the gush of the rain around them.

‘Meenister,’ said one of the landsmen peevishly to John on their return to the shelter. ‘Can ye no dae something?’

‘Aye, we’re rotting here,’ added another. ‘I’ve heerd tell that some plan tae tak a boat and sail tae Jamaica.’

‘Let’s dae it,’ came another voice.

‘Stupid, idle dreams,’ came the voice of Calum Colquhoun, which cheered John to hear, though its message did not. ‘Do ye no see it? Do you no see yer fate?’

‘Aye, and I’ll show ye your own fate, Colquhoun. I’ll finish ye now, bastard,’ cursed one of the men, rising slowly with lumbering menace. John saw his mad eyes and bedraggled hair as he stood, his fist raised, his chest heaving, over where Calum lay.

‘Listen, hold your hand,’ said John rising quickly and clamping hold of the man’s arm. He would have to act. He scanned the circle of sick and desperate faces. ‘I’ll go to Master Paterson. He’ll know of the Council’s plans and has influence with them. I’ll find out what I can and put the case for returning home.’

‘Aye, bless ye, Meenister. God aid ye, for they may tak notice o’ an educated man,’ said Davie McBride.

John stepped out from under the leaking roof of the shelter and found Susan behind him.

‘Sir, Master Paterson’s mighty poorly with the fever. He was raving all last night. I had to go to him, shouting out he was.’

‘Susan, will you come with me?’

‘Yes sir, I’ll come gladly.’

Inside William Paterson’s dark hut, they found a small boy, a cabin boy from the *Unicorn* who had been charged with the duty to care for the sick man. In a bed in the corner lay William Paterson, half dressed in shirt and breeches, sweat glistening on his face.

‘Who’s that?’ he said, sitting up with a start, his eyes staring.

‘It’s John Wyllie, sir, and Susan,’ said John.

‘The Council,’ he said without any sign of recognition, ‘you’ve come from the Council? They must not order the evacuation. They must not quit.’ His voice was a dry croak as he tried to rise to his feet, though he fell back on the bed with the effort. John went to him and took his arm, smelling the stench of sickness on his body.

‘Calm yourself, sir. Don’t rise. We seek news of the Council’s plans, but I see you’re not well.’

William Paterson gripped John's arm with the strength of a madman and stared at him. 'Who are you? Are you come to relieve us?'

'Sir, Master Paterson,' said Susan coming forward. 'Won't you take a drop of water.'

He ignored her and waving his head from side to side, moaned and whispered to himself. 'They will give in. They'll abandon – Bastard English, no supplies from Jamaica— Pennecuik says we're done for, but there will be a ship from Scotland soon. The Council, are they here to see me? Where are they? Where are they?'

Once again, he tried to rise, but failed and John and Susan together laid him back down upon the bed.

'I'll sit with him, sir,' said Susan. 'I think you better go to Captain Drummond, but take care, don't rouse him to anger, sir.'

John laid his hand on Susan's shoulder and she lightly touched her fingers on his. He plunged out across the muddy strip towards the place where the Captain's shelter stood. He passed other huts, their inmates crowded dolefully, white faces staring out through the sheet of rain. John wondered if he would ever feel dry again while he lived. But what purpose of thinking beyond the moment? Captain Drummond's shelter which he shared with some other officers, was of more solid construction than those of the landsmen. Its roof was covered with thick oiled cloth, supplemented with branches. Another cloth hung at the front to screen the inner space from view.

John paused outside for a moment, considering how to announce his arrival, but he could not delay.

'Captain? Sir? I must speak with you.'

'Who's that?' called the voice of their commander, in an irritated tone.

'John Wyllie, one of the landsmen. I would have words with you, if you'll permit it, sir.'

A moment later, the Captain's face appeared at the uncovered part of the shelter.

'You again? What's your business, man?' he snapped, looking at John as he stood dripping, hatless in front of him.

'Sir, the men, my comrades must know of the Council's plans. They hear talk. Is the colony to be abandoned? The Spaniards are gathering for an attack. Is there truth in these rumours?'

The commander stared back at John, with a look of disgust. 'Get ye gone,' he said with a snarl.

‘Sir, you know of our desperate state,’ said John. ‘We’re beyond help, unless you know aid is imminent. What of the supplies from Jamaica? The men are too weak and sick to build or to defend the place. If we were attacked, it would certainly fall to the enemy. All would be lost.’

Captain Drummond’s eyes narrowed, his voice bitter. ‘Where is your pride? Where is your honour? You would have us flee from this noble endeavour?’

‘Sir, what pride can there be in driving people to their graves? Do not honourable commanders know when to retreat?’

‘Get ye gone from my sight,’ said the commander, but with the impotent rage of the defeated.

On John’s return to the hut, a few expectant men rose to greet him. The sight of their looks, gaunt and desperate brought the lie to his lips.

‘Captain Drummond sees and understands our plight. He will bring it to the Council. Take heart, friends.’ But the men sank down again with dismal murmurs.

John crept back to the side of Calum Colquhoun who was now gripped with fever, his face glistening with sweat, his body tossing and shifting. He suddenly ceased his flailing and grasped at John’s wrist, holding it with the strength of a vice.

‘Where’s yer God now? he rasped.

‘In truth, Calum, I do not know,’ said John. ‘Perhaps He was never there, except in our imaginings.’

Scarce were these whispered words spoken, than he thought again of Thomas Aikenhead. Even he, who had denied the Holy Trinity, had railed against belief in the divinity of Christ would have balked at what now came from John’s own lips. But he felt no shock or dismay, no guilt or sorrow. God had not abandoned them for their sinful ways. He had not withdrawn his mercy, his love and forgiveness, for he and all his trappings were an elaborate fiction, fashioned to serve men’s needs and fears. There was no hope of anything but oblivion through the delirium of fever or, perhaps more mercifully, the quick slash of a Spaniard’s knife at the throat. The only truth was a shared death in the filth of this place. He lay down at Calum’s side in the mud and shut his eyes.

Flies buzzed to announce the heat of the day. There was no sound of rain. John and a few other landsmen crawled from the shelters, looking around them, startled like animals long-caged, suddenly finding themselves bewilderingly free. They gathered on the beach at the sight of a boat from one of the ships. Captain Drummond and his two remaining officers marched down to the rim of the beach to greet the craft. Provisions, food at last some relief.

But they were to be disappointed. The boat brought no bundles, casks or parcels of food, only two more officers who leapt ashore as soon as it was beached and fell into quick urgent talk with Captain Drummond. A moment later, Lieutenant Munro and another officer were ordered up the beach in the direction of William Paterson's hut and emerged carrying the sick man between them. The landsmen watched as William Paterson was lifted on to the craft and Captain Drummond commanded all of the officers, save one miserable looking fellow into the boat. Those left behind could do nothing but stare as the boat retreated from them over the waves.

'Pray to God we'll be going home,' said one of the landsmen.

'We must be patient,' said John.

'Amen tae that,' answered another. 'See the Meenister was right. Old Drummond's going to persuade them to let us gang hame.'

As they watched the oars splash and the boat depart towards the ships anchored at a distance in the bay, the men returned to their shelters, or to the shade of the trees in a weary limbo of idleness. There were no orders to work and only one officer remained in charge, he having taken to his hut. Susan and some others went foraging for food and John took himself back to the shelter to tend to Calum Colquhoun. The man lay without motion still wrapped in his plaid. John laid a hand on him and he stirred, turning over slowly, his eyes dull and unfocused.

'John,' he said, his voice scarcely audible. 'Will ye read me something out o' one o' yer books?'

'Aye, gladly Calum,' he replied, surprised at the request.

'As long as it's nae scripture,' said Calum with a weak smile.

'I've only one other book, and that's of verse,' said John, pulling Isobel's small battered volume from the damp bundle containing his bible and psalter.

'Aye, that'll please me fine,' said Calum.

John recited some of those verses which he now knew by heart, old ballads of heroism, revenge and love, watching a look of calm creep over his friend's face. The heat of the day had intensified by the time he saw that Calum was asleep. Others in the shelter dozed too and the buzz and whine of insects joined the gentle snoring as John lay down too.

He did not know how much later it was when he was wakened suddenly and rudely by wild shouts.

'Make haste for yer lives,' yelled one of the landsmen from a hut nearby. 'Run! There's a boat. It may be the last.'

John had to force his mind to wakefulness and looking out from the shelter, saw in the distance a group of diggers and landsmen gathering in a small crowd on the beach, some standing by the shore line while others heaved and pushed a boat into the waves. He rubbed his eyes and tried to work out what was happening. How long had he slept? It could surely have been no more than a few hours. Calum Colquhoun lay at his side, breathing noisily. John stood up and taking a step or two out of the shelter, stared down towards the beach. A boat bucked in the waves near the shore. Men were clambering over the side, while others shouted, grappling with their comrades to get in as the oarsmen struggled to prevent the loss of their oars in the fight.

Now John was witnessing what he dreaded most, the panic and hysteria which made monsters of desperate people. In spite of the load of men weighing it low in the water, the boat moved off, leaving about a dozen others stranded, flailing and splashing behind as the oarsmen pulled away. Leaving the shelter, he made his way down the slope of the beach to join those that were left.

He could see no one in command, no sign of the officer who had been left behind at Captain Drummond's departure. He saw Susan dragging the limp body of a man from the shallows where he had fallen face down. She lifted him bodily and carried him back to the beach.

'We're stranded,' shouted someone, 'May they rot in Hell for this!'

John watched the boat retreat further into the bay towards the anchored ships, realising that the decision had been made at last to abandon the colony. Now as they stood, he could not believe that they had been betrayed by their countrymen, left behind. One man collapsed on the sand weeping and others cursed.

'They'll send another boat,' said John, for there was no admitting the alternative. 'They're our countrymen. There'll be another to take us away. Take heart.'

John looked back at their pitiful collection of shacks and saw from another hut at about a distance of one hundred paces, two more men crawling out, like crabs along the sand. He recognized one of them as Alexander Jamieson. John ran quickly to him and crouching beside the cottar, looked into a face covered with a mess of sores, his hair almost gone, his lips cracked and blackened.

'Maister,' said the cottar with difficulty, groping in the air with his hand.

John slipped his arm around the man and raised him a little. 'Hold on, man. We're going home.' He knew as he spoke that Alexander Jamieson would never see his home or his family again.

‘Maister, will ye go tae my wife and bairns. Will ye tell them I tried, for a better life. Tell them, it was no for lack o’ tryin’.’ John heard the rattle in the man’s throat.

‘Neither God nor your family will find you wanting, Master Jamieson,’ said John, gripping the cottar’s shoulder. ‘I’ll take your blessing to them and see they are cared for. You have my word.’

Susan was beside John when he closed Alexander Jamieson’s eyes. She sobbed quietly, kneeling by his body with her head bent. Then after some moments of silence, they lifted his corpse between them and carried it to the burial ground. John, feeling the weakness of what he suspected was the start of a fever, toiled hard to dig while Susan swung her mattock with force and they had soon made a grave in which to lay him. As John mouthed a prayer, he thought of Mary, her brothers and mother in their poor cottage, so far away, so full of hope and mercifully ignorant, at least for now, of Alexander Jamieson’s fate. The father was lost, Willie’s money wasted and their chance of a better future gone forever.

John and Susan made their way back in silence to the beach. John had no words of comfort, real or feigned and she seemed locked in her own resilient grief. But he was grateful just for her presence beside him, faithful, strong and unfailing. They threw themselves down on the sand, a little way from the main group of men. The landsmen sat, crouched or lay on the very rim of the beach, their eyes trained on the distant ships at anchor. Two rose and stumbled into the sea, plunging and leaping into the waves, splashing madly in an effort to swim. Soon after, however, having floundered forward for only a short distance, they stopped and stood as the others did and stared out into the expanse.

Just as they were about to lose all hope, someone cried and pointed at a moving dot and there it was, another boat advancing towards the beach. Those lying prone now raised themselves to their feet and all voices suddenly burst out in wild and desperate shouts. John realised then that they must be the last of all on shore. Then he remembered Calum and two others who lay in the shelters too sick to move.

‘Come,’ he said, to a man who stood beside him, ‘there are sick men must be carried to the boat.’

‘Are ye mad?’ said he, curling his nose in disbelief at the folly of this suggestion, ‘we must save oursels, for they’re all done for.’

‘I’m comin’, sir,’ said Susan, ‘We can manage ‘em.’ She was already ahead of him, hirpling up the beach and John followed to the shelter where the sick men lay. Susan ran to Calum and started to heave him up, while John discovered that another was already stiff with

rigor. The third man lay with his mouth locked open, frozen in the moment that his last breath had fled. Calum, however, was conscious, but burning hot and feverish.

‘Naw, let me be, leave me in peace to bide here, lassie, for I’ve no the strength to move, nor wish to gang. I’m happy to die here,’ he said.

‘We’ll carry you, Calum,’ said John. ‘We’re going back to Scotland. Come man, take heart.’

‘John, awa’ wi’ ye. I’m at peace,’ said Calum, gulping hard and grasping at John’s hand. ‘I’ve found God. Would ye believe it? I, who cursed and railed against him, blasphemed and argued with ye. Now I know the truth o’ it. I know where God is and who he is. He’s in you and in that lassie there. That’s how he works. He’s no a being anywhere like Heaven and Hell, but here amang us, in the good that we do. Now go, the both o’ ye. I thank ye both from my heart, I bless ye, for now I have kenned the true love o’ God. Go, go, afore I cut my own throat.’

John crouched by his friend, watching as the man closed his eyes and feeling the pressure of his hand relaxing.

‘Sir,’ Susan said, pulling at his sleeve. ‘Come quick. We ain’t got time.’

Together they ran from the shelter, struggling over the beach to the boat. By now it was crammed full of men, the last ones tipping themselves head first into it, as two others in the water heaved and pushed the craft into the waves.

‘Wait for us, damn you!’ screamed Susan and the oarsmen held their oars aloft as she and John splashed through the water. Susan hauled herself up with no assistance from those aboard and John too had a firm hold of the boat’s edge until hit suddenly in the face by a blow so hard and heavy that it knocked him senseless.

Chapter 30

Susan bathed John's cheek again with wine, but the flesh was raw and open. Fever gripped him too, since she'd hauled him aboard the *Caledonia* and he slipped in and out of awareness. Three days out, all land left behind and still he had not awakened. Captain Drummond had ordered all the sick to stay on deck, only those without fever or flux being allowed below. But she'd not leave John's side. He was only one of the twenty or so desperate cases, fevered and raving or in the silent stillness before death. Four dead had been slipped into the ocean since the ship had unfurled its sails and sped away from the settlement

The mariners on the *Caledonia* looked at Susan with suspicious eyes when they saw her mark, though there were others aboard, those she'd laboured with on the land, who knew her as a comrade. Two of the men who'd tried to take her by force that night were also aboard, though they lay on the deck palsied and incapable in their sickness. Lieutenant Munro came by each day to ask about John. The officer himself looked weak and ailing but when he could, he brought Susan small pieces of dried fish to add to their miserable rations. Susan wished that Calum Colquhoun was with them; his wicked laughter and his fearlessness would have lent her strength, for she felt it failing, as she watched John's life slipping away. She grieved for Calum, alone in the miserable hut, in the place which was to have been their paradise.

She hardly dared sleep lest John should call out for help or water, or worse still, that she would not be with him at the moment of his death. She knew that his wound needed stitching but there was no surgeon left alive and all the loblolly boys were dead of fever too. She would not risk paining him more, for fear it might speed his end. She whispered prayers day and night. 'Please, dear holy God, if yer can hear me. Don't heed all what I said about not believing in yer. Lord Jesus ye'll not find a better one than John Wyllie. But don't take him to yer yet. If yer want a life, take mine. I know ain't much but it's all I got.' Was she fated, she wondered, to pray for the lives of those that she loved and then to lose them? Here she was alive, in spite of everything that had been rained down upon her, while ones she loved had perished before her eyes. She would have howled aloud but would not risk being clapped in irons as a mad, raving thing, a witch possessed of the Devil. Instead she lay quietly beside John, muffling her face in her apron of sackcloth and mumbling prayers.

Davie McBride, who had thrown off the fever and now walked unsteadily like an aged beggar upon the deck, came up to her as she sat.

‘Dinnae fret, Missus,’ he said, his once ruddy face now shrunken and grey. ‘The young Meenister ‘s bound for a better place. Have nae fear for his soul.’

Susan nodded to him, feeling her head droop with exhaustion where she sat. The buffeting of the wind in the sails, the calls of sailors high above and the creaking and clanking of the ship in motion were almost soothing as she slid into sleep, in spite of her will to stay wakeful. Then something broke into her dozing mind and she opened her eyes to see that John was stirring.

‘Susan?’ he said, his voice a dry whisper.

Suddenly alert, Susan grasped his hand, her heart leaping. He was awake, alive and now she knew she would have to keep her bargain with God.

‘Yes sir, I’m here and we’re goin’ home.’

She wept, the tears streaming from her eyes, though he would not see, being drowsy and unsure where he found himself. She dipped a cloth in water and wet his lips, then cradled his head to help him drink. He raised his hand to his face.

‘No sir, don’t you touch that. I best put a stitch into it, or it will get all muck and dirt in it. Can you bear it, sir? If I goes for a needle?’

He moaned but seemed calm though unable to move. It would have to be done. Susan rose and went to one of the sailors and begged a bottle of grog. He was a rough man but one who was beholden to her, for she had bound his broken finger when it was mangled by a pulley rope in their haste to depart from the bay.

‘Aye, this’ll kill a wee bit o’ the pain,’ he said, handing her a small stone bottle.

‘Thanks to you,’ said Susan. ‘It don’t take much to knock him out. And can I beg a needle off yer too?’

She returned to John and knelt by his side, pulling a thread from the sacking of her rough apron, carefully teasing it apart to form a finer piece and threading the needle. ‘I know I keeps telling you not to take strong drink, sir, but you’ll need a little for what I’ve got to do,’ she said and held the bottle to his lips.

Thirst made him gulp it and she saw that his body fell slack with the drink and his half conscious state. Moving quickly, she doused the wound with wine, squeezed the edges together and jabbed the needle in. He flinched and grabbed her arm.

‘Sir, pardon me,’ she whispered to him. ‘But it must be closed.’

Then the drink did its usual work upon him and he was soon out cold, so she stitched a line on his cheek neater than a hem on any fine lady’s gown.

All night she lay beside him, her hand on his arm, feeling his wrist to find the pulse of his heart. It was still there, as the ship heaved upon the sea, the clink and creak of rope of wood, the flap of canvas, the low voices of mariners on deck, the moan of the sick ones near her. She prayed again for all those poor souls, fevered and in pain. How many would live to see their homes again? How many would go to their graves in the ocean?

The next day dawned bright and clear, kindly weather with a clean breeze blowing. Sailors aloft swung high above her, furling sails and tying loose ropes. A carpenter hammered on the deck. The acid stink of vinegar wafted over from where two boys scrubbed the decks against the sickness. She looked at John, who now breathed steady and safe.

‘Good day, Missus. Looks like the Lord has spared us another day,’ said Davie McBride, coming over the deck to her, ‘and yer man too?’

She smiled at his greeting. ‘Yes,’ she said, with a shiver of gratitude as John stirred beside her.

‘Weel Meenister, you’re back wi’ us the day. And I’m here too, thanks be to God. But you can thank this good woman here for yer life as well.’

‘Susan?’ said John. ‘What happened? Where are we?’

‘Good God, he doesnae know,’ said Davie McBride. ‘You know nothing o’ being pulled on tae the boat, by this woman here, by her own bare hands and you lying useless here, between Heaven and Hell these last four days.’

‘Sir, have some water, for you’ll be parched,’ said Susan, holding the cup to his lips. He looked at her with a puzzled frown.

‘Susan, how many times is it that you have saved my life?’

‘See, didn’t I tell yer, sir. Your’re meant to live, ain’t yer?’

‘Aye Susan, I suppose I am. But for what purpose?’

‘Don’t ask me about purpose. I don’t know nothin’ about purpose. I just gets on with things, like you oughter. And sir, look what I got ‘ere.’

She pulled out the small book from the pocket of her apron and held it before him. She had seen it cast aside in the shelter in their hasty leaving of the settlement, and knew that it was something close to his heart.

‘Got a bit mangled and wet, what with all the hullabaloo of going,’ she said as he took the small battered thing.

He was too weak to raise himself, so she slid her arm behind his shoulders and heaved him up. Some of the pages of the book were all blotched and stained, but he held it like it was the most precious jewel in the world.

‘Susan, how can I thank you?’ he said, unsteady.

‘Ain’t no need, sir. And look ‘ere I got something else,’ she continued, drawing out Mistress Paterson’s small leather pouch from her bodice. ‘My Missus was a mighty generous lady. In ‘ere’s pearls what’ll fetch us a pretty penny when we have need o’ it.’

Two weeks later, folks were all talking of reaching port, the town of New York. Susan overheard a group of the landsmen vow to escape to this new world, never to return to Scotland nor to set foot on any ship ever again. A few bold or foolhardy ones had already made off in secret when the ship had anchored off the island of Jamaica, jumping overboard in the dark and swimming to shore. Fifteen more men had perished since leaving Darien and Captain Drummond ruled with a cruel hand on board, raging bitter and furious at the leaving of the colony, shouting orders, punishing sailors and landsmen with lashes for the breaking of any rules. Susan heard men curse their commander, their hatred and fear of him giving strength to those planning to take off as soon as the ship reached port.

Susan stood beside John, leaning on the rail and staring at the waves. She was overjoyed to see him recovered, though thin and pale as all were, surviving on hard tack and putrid water. His wound was livid red, but was knitting up pretty well with no sign of poisoning. The scar was a ridge on the side of his face, the length of a thumb, from cheekbone to jaw, but it would not destroy his beauty, not in her eyes or those of the world, she was sure.

He turned to her suddenly. ‘Susan, what do you say we should land at New York? We could make a new life for ourselves, as we had hoped to do in Darien.’

She was too stunned to answer for moment. Perhaps she’d not heard him aright. ‘You mean get off of the ship and live in that new land, both o’ us?’

‘Aye, Susan. New York is a thriving, growing town. Have you not heard people speak of it on board? Some of the men have been there before. It’s a new country with houses, industry, trades people, schools, places where a living could be made, like any town. What do you say?’

His eyes were alight again, his hope returned and it cheered her heart, in spite of her surprise.

‘But sir, have you no longin’ to return to the place of your birth, to your native land?’ she said.

He sighed and stared out to sea again. ‘I’ve little to take me back. There’s my promise to Alexander Jamieson, of course, to see his family and to ensure that his wife and

children are not too severely in want. But perhaps, with your good grace, I could borrow some money from you, from the sale of the pearls, to send to Mistress Jamieson. I could also seek assurances from Captain Drummond that widows will get what the Company promised. I'd repay you, once I'd found employment, of course.'

'Sir, you've been scheming this all in yer head, ain't you?' she said, feeling her mind turning towards the idea. 'But I've told yer, them pearls is ours to share, for the Missus felt warmly of you too.'

'Susan, you're too generous in everything you do,' he said and took her hand, polite and respectful like she was some lady in a parlour. If he'd only known how, in her whore's-mind, she longed to grasp hold of him, touch him, embrace him as she had done when he lay senseless before her. She knew he'd not notice the flush of heat on her because of the dirt of her unwashed face and her mark.

'What else should take me back to Scotland?' he continued. 'My father? I'd be reconciled with him if I could, but there's little hope of that. I'm beyond redemption in his eyes, and now this failure. I'd wish to right the wrongs done to us in Colinton, but I'll not submit to the judgement and punishment of the Kirk, for we were guiltless.' He turned to her, his eyes dark and strong. 'In this new world of America, I've heard there's freedom to worship God however you choose, to speak your mind and opinions freely without fear of punishment. Some day, perhaps, I might return to Scotland. But Susan, we two are alive. We have survived. You have saved me by your kindness and courage. Now we both have a chance of living a good life, a new life. What are your thoughts? Tell me.'

'Yes sir, well, I dunno,' said Susan, not understanding why she felt such discomfort at his words.

He turned from her, his eyes on the empty ocean again. 'No, Susan. I have no reason to return. There is only one person who could ever draw me back and I'll never see her nor speak to her again. I must not even think of her.'

He paused and drew breath. 'Foolish, weak creature that I am, I cannot help but think of her. And when I do, all my resolve, all my strength floods away. What will it take for me to forget her? What must I do?'

'Why should you forget her, sir?' said Susan, puzzled. 'Why would yer rid yourself of yer sweetest memories? When I feels low and miserable, I brings pictures of my Alfred to my eyes and remember holding him in me arms, or Willie Jamieson, dear little lad or the times I've had with —.' She broke off, feeling the danger of a confession spilling from her

lips. 'It makes me sad, but ain't it better to have known love, to know what it's like to be loved? Conjure the best to mind when yer feels in need.'

He turned to her again, his dark eyes piercing her so that she could not meet his gaze.

Only a few days later, the ship dropped anchor in the wide river on which stood the town of New York. Across the water, all on the deck of the *Caledonia* gazed at the tall coloured brick buildings of the town, heard the distant rumble of cart wheels on hard roadways, the shouts of people going about their business. Susan was sure that she caught the smell of roast meat wafting from the shore. She and John stood near a group of landsmen staring, hanging over the side, as though their longing might pull them closer to it.

'They'll no let the likes of us get off,' muttered one of the landsmen.

'Well, if I've tae swim, I'll gang,' said another. 'I'll go no more on this hell bucket.'

'Bold talk,' said Davie McBride, 'and how dae ye plan tae make your escape?'

'Just tak'a look yonder. Dae ye not see all the skiffs and barges on the river. I've a wee bit o' silver put by,' said the first man under his breath to Davie.

Susan pondered, with a fluttering in her belly, whether such a daring dream might really come to pass. Was it possible that she could go with John into this new land? Could she be with him as he made a new life for himself? Would he take up schoolmastering again? What bliss to cook and wash and clean for him. But whatever was his future, pauper or rich man, she'd serve him –.

She broke off from her dreaming when Lieutenant James Munro approached, looking a mite more cheerful. 'Good day to you,' he said. 'What a fine sight, do you not think? It's not the Celestial City, but it will do for me.'

The officer took up a place next to John and leaned over the rail, while Susan sat on an upturned bucket mending a rip in her apron. 'I'll go ashore for a day or two,' he said with a note of apology.

'Is there no way,' asked John, 'that we could leave the ship, for Susan and I have a fancy to try for a new start in New York?'

'Are you in earnest?' said the officer, glancing round at Susan.

She felt herself colour and was cut to the quick by what Lieutenant Munro might be thinking. She jumped to her feet. 'Sir, I'm Master Wyllie's servant,' she said with the boldest look she could summon.

Lieutenant Munro shuffled his feet and mumbled, 'Of course,' while John looked startled. Innocent, pure-minded soul that he was, thought Susan, and after all that he's seen and heard. She set about searching for her needle which she'd dropped on the deck.

'Aye, there's a way,' said Lieutenant Munro renewing their talk. 'I'll see if a boat can be brought to take you off. But I fear it may take money.'

Susan looked up again. 'I can pay,' she said, hearing a touch of pride in her voice.

'We'd be much in your debt, James,' said John, 'though I'd not have you risk the commander's wrath or even punishment for aiding fugitives.'

'I'd gladly come with you,' the officer replied, with a sigh, 'but desertion's a hanging offence and I've a craving to see the old country again.'

'My thanks to you, James. There are others too would make their escape.'

'I'll be happy to enquire on your behalf and your comrades,' he said leaning close to John and whispering. 'I'll bring you intelligence of what can be arranged in a few days.'

Lieutenant Munro was true to his word. He came to John and Susan after his return from the town with news that a boatman and his craft had been hired to take off up to ten people, some time in the next three nights. The officer advised those who would flee should stay near the bow ropes after dark each night and wait for the sign of a red light from the boatman below. Two nights went by with no sign of any craft on which they might escape and Susan wondered if their flight might never happen. She was strangely untroubled however, and felt a peculiar weakness overcome her as she lay waiting and listening on the third night for the sound of the splash of oars or the blink of a red light on the black water.

Susan felt her skin dampen with sweat though the night was cool. Her vision was blurred but she could see John sitting nearby, propped against the rail, writing in his small book by the light of a lantern. She tried to lift her head, but a dull deep pain pinned it down and her throat was raw. She could barely shift her legs for they were heavy as blocks of wood. Why could she not move herself? There was a knot in her stomach which heaved and threatened to rise and choke her. It was then that she knew. This was to be the manner of her death. And why not, for she had seen so many others perish like this before her? What more happiness could she have and what more suffering endure in this life? Yet, she still craved just one more touch of his hand, one more look, one more kind word to her, even after so many and so much joy in being with him. How selfish was she to wish for more when she had been so blessed? 'Thank you, God,' she murmured to herself, watching John until her eyelids drooped and blocked out her sight.

Then someone was shaking her arm, grasping it tight. It was John, his face close to hers.

‘Susan, Susan, wake up,’ he was saying from some far away place although she thought he must be beside her. ‘The boat’s here, ready to take us off. We must go at once. We must make haste and be away before we’re discovered. Susan, are you sick?’

She couldn’t move her jaw, her tongue was sluggish and huge in her mouth. She had to speak but it was no good. She tried to swallow and heard a hoarse rasping voice come from her throat.

‘Sir, I can’t raise meself. I ain’t right. You go, sir. Go now. Don’t wait on me, sir.’

‘Come Susan. It’s not far to the boat. It’s waiting for us. Come. I’ll help you.’

She felt his arm slide around her back and tried with all her strength to push with her feet, but they were no longer attached to her body. Then another pair of hands was upon her too, pulling her by the arm, but she could not raise her head and it fell back, making sparks whirl in her brain as she felt herself being lifted and carried.

‘Wait for us,’ called someone. It was John’s voice and she felt his arm tight around her, his breath on her face, his hair brush her cheek. There was the sound of water slapping, the smell of salt in the air and voices shouting in whispers around her.

‘I’ve told you. We’ll not take sick ones,’ said a voice from far away, ‘Get back!’

‘It’s only a touch of fever, damn you. I can pay more,’ John was saying. ‘Lend me aid, for pity’s sake.’

‘Leave her man, in God’s name! She’s dying. Can ye no see? Save yersel!’

The arms still embraced her but then she was tumbling backwards, until she landed with a jolt on a hard surface which jarred her backbone and cracked her head, flooding her brain with rushing, icy blackness. Then there was a strange, calm silence, dark and warm about her, wrapping her in a cloak of softness and then there was no more pain.