

## Chapter 31

July            London

‘So you’d have me wed Master Needham whether I love him or no?’ said Isobel to her mother, slapping the bread dough down hard upon the table.

‘Lassie, you would look far to find a better man and you will be safe from the other. Did you not say that you cared for him?’

‘Yes, he is pleasing enough,’ said Isobel, pausing and looking at her mother whose knuckles kneaded her dough in a steady rhythm. ‘But I don’t love him, mother. He has little care for what interests me, my work, nor my love of it. He might not let me carry on. Must I marry one man to escape another?’ Isobel heard her voice grow shrill.

‘Isobel, you expect too much,’ said her mother, her voice snapping with irritation. ‘Master Payne was not a good man, but young Master Needham would be a kind and loving husband to you. You’re a fool if you can’t see that. Most lassies would jump at such a man. What have we done to have raised such a proud and willful creature? Have you no sense in your head?’

Jean Fletcher tore the lump of dough in half. Then she looked up at Isobel and continued, softer and more pleading now. ‘Master Needham loves you. I’m certain of it. I can see it in the way he looks at you, lassie. He would use you well. You would have bairns and your own home, just think.’

Isobel felt the weight of her mother’s argument upon her, the good sense of it pulling her down. She bit her lip and bowed her head to her kneading.

‘Could I be a good wife without loving him, though? It’s not right. I feel it inside me. Why break free from one wrongful match to fall into another? Madame Padeloup has counselled me to listen to my heart.’

‘Madame Padeloup? You’d be guided by a foreign woman before your own mother. How could you, Isobel?’

‘Mother, don’t be crabbit and cross. Madame Padeloup told me about her own daughter. I’m not disloyal.’ Isobel felt her voice breaking. ‘I’ve known the love of a man and have felt such —’

‘Ah, that bonny young minister’s son, John Wyllie. I might have known. Dear God Isobel, there’s no hope of him now. How many letters have you sent and no word back?’

‘I know, mother. It’s true. I know in my mind it’s foolishness. I’ll never see him again.’

‘But what moved you so about John Wyllie that you cannot feel for poor Master Needham?’ said her mother. ‘Is he not as comely?’

Isobel pressed her fingers slowly and deliberately into the dough and answered in a measured tone, strengthened now by a certainty which filled her as she spoke. ‘There was no arrogance in John Wyllie. He treated me as his equal. He admired and valued my work.’

‘Hah,’ said her mother, ‘are you so green that you believe all a man’s flattering words?’

Isobel looked up at her mother. ‘John didn’t flatter me with shallow words. He was not self-seeking in his interest; he was always sincere. And he suffered for what happened to Thomas. It shook his faith and changed his heart, but not his feelings for me which were always constant and true. He valued me for what I am and, mother, you will think me shameless to say this, but I burned with a passion for him and do so still to this day. There, you have it all before you. I have confessed all to you.’

Isobel’s hands pushed rhythmically and automatically at the dough and she said nothing more. She heard her mother dumping her dough on the griddle and a moment later, felt her arm around her shoulders.

‘Well my lassie, if that is the truth of your heart, then I think you’d better write to him one last time. Mayhap the other letters went astray, or he has moved away. Could you not write to his father? He was minister of Morningside parish, was he not? He would surely know of his son’s whereabouts. You could ask the minister to send your letter to him wherever he is, could you not?’

‘Oh mother,’ said Isobel, looking up with startled gratitude at her mother’s response. ‘John’s father is a cruel and heartless man who didn’t approve of me at all. But perhaps I should do as you say, for I’ve nothing to lose by it.’

‘Go now, lassie and write your note,’ said Jean Fletcher. ‘I will do no more persuading and haranguing. I can see if a man won your heart, it would hold fast forever. But God knows what will become of you.’

Isobel kissed her mother and went with haste in search of paper and pen and then sat down at the table and wrote swiftly.

*Clement Lane, London*

*My Dearest John,*

*If ever you receive this note, know that I am free and still hold you in that deep regard and affection which I felt from the moment we first met. I beg of you to send word of your situation and whether I might hope that you return my feelings. To hear for better or worse would ease my mind and to know you are alive and well would cheer the heart of your dear and loving friend,*

*Isobel*

*P.S. My other letters to you tell my story, but I fear they must have all gone astray.*

Isobel folded this paper carefully, sealing it securely with wax and enclosed it inside another addressed to Reverend Archibald Wyllie, Morningside, Near Edinburgh, Scotland.

*Dear Sir,*

*I would be much in your debt if you would deliver the enclosed which contains urgent but not harmful information for the eyes of John Wyllie.*

*Respectfully*

*I.F.*

Isobel threw on her shawl and ran to the posting inn, several streets away from their lodgings, her mind charged with a new optimism. She paid the messenger more than the expected sum, stressing the urgency of the message. Walking back from the place, she remembered the dour and dreadful Reverend Wyllie. She imagined him holding her letter in his hand, his face a frown of suspicion. Her letter would no doubt end in the fire, unless, she fervently hoped, the minister's Christian conscience forbade the invasion of the privacy of others. But whatever the outcome, this act had driven her resolve to do something else.

Turning into Ave Maria Close, she saw the shop sign of *Needham's Booksellers to the Gentry* swaying gently in the breeze. The shops in this small road were neat and prosperous and the thoroughfare soundly cobbled and clean. Isobel knew that arriving unannounced might not

please Samuel or his father, or she might not find either in the shop. She was determined to try, for her mind was made up. She pushed the door open and entered to find only one other customer within, a man in the dark coat of a clerk or a secretary conversing with the shopkeeper about the price of a volume on the counter in front of them.

The men broke off their talk for a moment, turned round and eyed her briefly.

‘I’ll be with you directly, Mistress,’ said the assistant and the men exchanged looks.

While they continued their conversation, Isobel occupied herself by examining some of the bindings which she remarked were of inferior workmanship to her own and Monsieur Padeloup’s. Suddenly, a door behind the counter opened and Samuel came out, holding a sheaf of papers in his hand. At the sight of Isobel, his face lit up and he came quickly towards her, smiling with pleasure.

‘Master Simpkins,’ he said to the assistant a little sternly, ‘why did you not tell me that Mistress Fletcher was here?’

The man blustered something about not realising and reddened. ‘Pardon me, Master Samuel,’ he said.

‘No matter, man,’ said Samuel staring at Isobel. ‘Come with me, Isobel, into the office.’

She curtsied to him and took the arm that he offered as he led her into the small room.

‘This is such a pleasure, Isobel, to see you here,’ said Samuel placing a chair for her and perching in front of her on the desk.

Isobel felt her courage seeping away and her anxiety growing, now that she was face to face with Samuel whose eyes shone with unsuspecting happiness. Was her decision wise? Perhaps after all Samuel Needham would be the loving husband that her mother craved for her. Was she stubborn and blind to cling to a hopeless love distorted and magnified by longing and absence? Here was a man who loved her. What more could she wish for?

‘Isobel, can I hope that the reason for your visit is to give me the word which will make me the happiest man in London?’

‘Samuel, I’m sorry,’ said Isobel, feeling her mouth dry as she spoke. ‘I respect and esteem you. I am most flattered by your attentions, but I cannot be your wife.’

The smile dropped from his face as though he had been struck by a sudden blow. His eyes were harder now. ‘May I know the reason, Mistress? I hope this is no wicked trick you play with my affections, for you gave me good cause to believe that you cared for me.’

‘I do, Samuel. I was not false in that regard. You little know me if you think I would cause you pain by toying with your feelings. I know too much of the pain of disappointment. But I did not truly know my mind until today.’ She paused and looked at him, seeing his eyes glint with hurt. ‘The fault is not with you, Samuel, I promise. Please believe me. It is I who am lacking. You could have done no more to please me.’

‘How ridiculous then to refuse me, Isobel,’ he cried, rising quickly, sweeping his coat sleeve across his eyes and turning from her to look out of the window. ‘You love another man. That’s it, is it not?’

‘Yes, Samuel, you’re right in part. I love someone, or the idea of someone I once knew some time ago. He may well be joined with another, or dead for all I know or have heard of him this past year.

Samuel turned back to her. ‘I can scarce believe what you tell me, Isobel. You love someone yet have no hope of him?’

‘I know it’s foolish, but my whole being was changed by knowing him. I don’t think myself capable of feeling like a wife should to a husband, unless it be him. Pardon me please, Samuel. Will you forgive the hurt I’ve caused you?’

His face softened and her heart pounded with guilt and sorrow for him. He sat down again opposite her and bowed his head.

‘Perhaps it’s my fate too, to love with no hope of a return of affection as you do. What a sad state of affairs for us both.’

‘Samuel, I wish you well. You are a kind and loving man.’

He looked at her and with a great effort steadied his voice. ‘Isobel, if after some time you were to reconsider, could I come to you again?’

‘No Samuel, I will not torment you with false hope, for I know too well the misery of it. I am resolved never to marry. But you should find another, a better woman, a lady worthy of you. God bless you and keep you.’

It was done and though Samuel’s response had shown far more sorrow than she had ever imagined, she felt a lightness, a relief of the burden of indecision, a clarity about how she would live out the rest of her life. She would work to earn her keep, an old maid till the end. She knew that there would be no reply from John. She would be married to her craft and none else.

Returning home, she found her parents much occupied with news which her father had from a broadsheet purchased that day.

‘Tis about the colony. You remember the Company of Scotland that was to found a trading place far away in the Indies?’ said her father. ‘Just listen to this, though it is ill news of our country.’

Isobel sat down and listened as her father read slowly and deliberately from the newssheet in his hand.

“The Scots ship the *Caledonia*, the only one to survive from a splendid fleet, has arrived back in the Clyde with a ragged troop of half-starved, diseased and broken people. The hopes of the noble undertaking are now all dashed and some of these poor wretches have been stoned in the street, for the cowardice of their desertion, but it seems, by the accounts that we have heard that they had much misery and hardship to endure, and that we should more pity than deride their efforts. The unfortunate colonists had found no one ready to trade in those parts, nor to provide supplies for their relief. Then to add to their woes, the forces of the King of Spain marched against the Scots to force them from the territories. The settlement is abandoned. There is little hope, it seems, of anyone recovering their investments, though more ships are travelling at this time to Darien. Some say the country is bankrupted and others talk of forcing a union with England. These news are noised abroad and the shame and disgrace shouted about the country. It is Scotland’s disaster to be sure and will no doubt bring about hardship to the nation never known before.’

‘Tis miserable news indeed,’ said Isobel, ‘that so many have perished and so much has been lost. What future is there now for our poor country?’

‘Aye, lassie,’ said her father, ‘it seems we must keep our heads down and continue our toil in London, at least for a while.’

‘I’m more than happy to do that, father,’ said Isobel. ‘I have news for you too. I went to Master Needham this day and told him that I cannot marry him. So, it seems I must bide with you for as long as God keeps breath in my body and skill in my hands.’

Jean Fletcher sighed aloud, though Isobel saw a glance exchanged between her parents which was not wholly of disapproval.

‘Lassie, come and sup,’ said her mother. ‘Let’s talk of good times and not dwell on the dismal tidings. We must not look back, for there are sad memories aplenty. Let’s drink on the future.’

They drained their glasses in a toast and pledged to look ahead to whatever the future would bring.

That night, Isobel resolved that she must now rid her mind of all thoughts of John, other than as someone much loved but gone for ever. She took his letters, his poem to her and his portrait from her box and sat with them upon her knee for some time. They must be burned, and she poked at the coals of the fire in readiness for the act. But she could not do it. She could not let them be consumed. She would hide them, as she had the memories and hopes of him in her heart, so she wrapped the papers again, plunging them under her linen and books to the bottom of the box. She thought how she would ask, if she should ever have the luxury of such a request, that John’s papers be buried with her, for she could not, nor would she ever part with them.

It was a bright, sunlit morning, crisp and clear. The fires of the night had sunk low and for a while the air was clearer, until the stoking of furnaces and stoves in manufactories and hearths was started for the day’s activities. Isobel stepped out briskly and made her way to Monsieur Padeloup’s shop, coming near to the great church of St Paul’s with a magnificent dome taking shape beneath the scaffolding. Near the churchyard, she came upon a beggar huddled in a doorway. She took out of her bundle her bread for her midday meal and tearing off a piece, handed it to the skinny creature who grabbed it without a grunt of thanks and crammed it into his mouth, chewing hard with the black stumps of his teeth.

Isobel was about to turn from him when suddenly the beggar’s jaws froze as he stared over her shoulder at something or someone behind her. His eyes flickered at her and he nodded his head in a gesture of warning. She turned and saw through the thin stream passersby on the street, two men in particular about fifty paces away, staring at her and exchanging words. One was a stout gentleman in a burgundy coat and curled wig, the other a working man in a brown waistcoat of leather and a cap upon his head. Without further pause, Isobel hurried away and stepped quickly down a narrow alley beside the church in the opposite direction from her usual path to work.

Halfway down the alleyway a recessed doorway offered a hiding place. She shrank back into it, feeling her heart pounding hard, knowing that what she had feared most had happened. The stout man was Nicolas Payne. He and his companion had sighted her, close to her place of work. The master bookbinder had not given up his quest and now, it appeared, had taken another into his employ to fulfil it.

For some moments, she waited, peering from her hiding place to the hole of light at the end of the alleyway. It darkened as someone filled it with his body. She did not dare look out again, but heard no sound of anyone approaching, no footsteps echoing down the passage. For some time she waited, her heart throbbing, not risking to move, her mind frozen and unable to think beyond the immediate need to stay hidden. Then it came to her what she must do. She must lead them away from her real place of work, away to another part of the city. She must reveal herself to them but still evade capture. Quitting the doorway, she ran at full speed down the alley, coming out by the Guildhall where she was glad to see a goodly throng of people. There was no sign of Nicolas Payne or his companion and she prayed to God, if she was seen again that He would grant her speed to outrun the man engaged to discover her. She weaved across the Guildhall Square and suddenly saw the two figures emerging from the end of King Street.

Holding her nerve, she stood for some moments until she saw their gaze upon her, then she bolted down Throgmorton Lane and sped along, bumping and swerving through people streaming against her. Her breath came fast, tearing at her chest. She would have to stop soon or collapse in the street. Ahead, at the foot of the city wall, where a number of traders of the poorer sort had stalls, a group of women were crowded round a fire. Ragged and beggarly, some were picking through a bundle of rags upon the ground muttering and cursing, while one poked at the fire. Another held a bottle of liquor from which she drank, tipping her head back before passing it to one of her companions. Isobel ran to them.

‘Please help me. There’s a man— He would do me harm —’ The faces of the women turned to her. ‘Please, I beg of you. I have a silver penny if you will only help. Can I hide among you?’

‘Ere ye are, me dearie,’ said one of the women, the tallest of the group, the phlegm gurgling in her throat. ‘Hide your pretty little ‘ead in this, then get down at me feet.’

Isobel felt a stinking rug thrown over her head, so heavy that it pulled her down on to her knees. Hands shoved her to the ground and she lay, covered over, amid the foul rags upon the dirt, hearing only the crackling of the fire and the cackling of the women's voices above her.

## Chapter 32

August

Glasgow and Colinton

Something about the low-roofed tavern, its beams brushing his head, the cave-like darkness of it, helped John to walk more steadily to the table, for the ground still heaved and rolled beneath his feet from the last months at sea. The place was filled with a pungent, comforting smell of meat and onions stewing, so rich as to pierce his senses with the expectation of another solid meal. He turned to Susan who followed him and took her arm, finding himself still surprised to see her in her neat, plain gown, new plaid and hat with a veil. Of indeterminate rank, she appeared something of a mystery. Indeed she seemed changed somehow, beyond the transformation in her dress, John thought.

‘Come, Susan, we’ll dine heartily again tonight,’ he said.

He heard her utter a chuckle of pleasure from beneath her veil, though he could not see her face as they sat down. He was grateful to sit down for his legs still felt weak, though he and Susan had both rested well these last two days, on wooden beds between linen sheets in the chambers of a comfortable inn.

The warmth of the place relaxed his body, releasing his mind to acknowledge a strange new sense, born of relief and surprise at his situation. Alive and reasonably sound in limb, with money in his pocket, here was another chance at life. He would never forget the horrors, the deaths, the desperation and its consequences, but amidst all this, it seemed, there was the small spark which ignited the human soul to burn and glow when fanned with hope. Perhaps this is what God had given to man. John did not know any more, but would give thanks for it and keep on his path until his light went out, by whatever blow of fate, mischief or mishap. Man could never know what God intended, nor even if He had any purpose or intent at all. Whether Christ was His son or no, to live with hope in the power of goodness, forgiveness and love was the only way, for to think men evil only made them so.

‘Does you regret it, sir, not bein’ in that far off town, New York?’ said Susan. ‘For you could be there now at your schoolmasterin’, walking the streets of a new city.’

‘No, not at all,’ said John. ‘This town of Glasgow will be as good a place as any to make a new start. There are grammar schools and parish schools in want of schoolmasters. Here I

may find a post as well as in any place. I must set my mind to the task as soon as I'm able. But tomorrow I must make the journey to Colinton to honour my pledge to Alexander Jamieson.'

He paused and looked at Susan, mildly vexed that he could not see her face nor fathom her thoughts.

'Are you weary of travel, Susan? Would you come with me?'

Susan said nothing for a moment and John heard what he thought was a muffled sob.

'Susan, what ails you?' he said, concerned.

'Don't know why I'm blubbin', sir. Pardon me, will yer, sir. You knows I'd go anywhere with you. Others would've chucked me o'er the side like so much rubbish, but not you. Don't know what's up wi' me. Must be the sickness has set me a-snivelling, like some lily-livered creature.'

John laughed. 'Hardly, Susan you have the fortitude of ten, in mind and body.'

The landlady bustled up to them and stood at the table eying them in turn.

'Whit are ye suppin' the day?' she said.

They ordered beef in gravy and two pots of ale and water. They had sold one of Mistress Paterson's pearl necklaces for a handsome price, though they were frugal in their spending on clothes and lodgings, to eke it out. John had insisted that Susan should keep the other necklace in memory of her mistress, vowing to pay her back the value of the first as soon as he was able.

'Sir it ain't right us goin' about like this,' said Susan after the landlady had banged two pots of ale on the board in front of them. 'It don't look respectable. You'll soil your good name.'

'And what of yours, Susan?' he said, thinking that he and she looked respectable enough, in their demeanour and dress, plainly but cleanly appareled in the clothes bought in the market, soon after they had disembarked from the *Caledonia*. They had withdrawn to separate single apartments in the inn, as any brother and sister travelling together might have done, in spite of the sordid intimacy they had shared through their sickness on deck on the journey home.

'No sir, don't mock. I speaks serious-like.'

'You travel as my kinswoman, my cousin,' said John. 'What's wrong in that, in the eyes of the world?'

'We both knows well what the eyes of the world has made of us before,' she said, 'and I'm no more fit to be kin to you than a dog is. Please sir, grant me one thing and one thing only.'

‘Of course, Susan. How could I deny you?’ he said. ‘I promised to be your protector, when you lay sick on board the ship. You know I am bound to you by gratitude and respect for ever. I owe you my life.’

He reached across the table and took her hand.

She paused and laughed. ‘Well, will yer make me a honest woman?’ she said.

John’s cup banged on the table, he being unable to contain the shock of her command.

‘Susan, I—’

Then she peeped from under her veil at him and he saw that she was laughing, her mark puckering and creasing in her delight.

‘Oh sir, ain’t I wicked to tease yer so?’

He blushed with the embarrassment of being so duped and with a small secret shame at his relief.

‘I only ask to serve yer sir,’ Susan continued, her tone earnest again, ‘to be yer maid of all work, if yer thinks me fit. When you finds yourself back at schoolmastering again, you’ll have need o’ a person to keep house, cook and clean and launder and the rest, won’t yer?’

‘Susan, I would be—’

‘And another thing, sir. What kind of a master takes his servant by the hand?’

‘A grateful one,’ John said solemnly, ‘but I see it’s not right. Forgive me, Susan.’

He could scarcely believe his ignorance, his innocence about Susan’s feelings and his own well-meant but misguided behaviour towards her. He looked at her again and she lifted her veil a little and nodded at him with a smile. He knew then that whatever foolish or ill-judged acts he committed, she would forgive, accept and serve him for ever. He remembered then how, amidst the ravings of her fever and delirium on the ship, when he had feared for her life, she had called his name, confessed her ardent love for him, begged that he would hold her and kiss her, had sworn that she would die for love of him.

‘Susan, I would be honoured to have you in my employ, if that is your wish.’

They took a lumbering stage wagon from the Spyglass Inn on the Broomielaw by the River Clyde for the journey cross country, there being no coach. As the road was not too much encumbered by mud or serious obstacles, they made good time and reached the village of

Sighthill to the west of Edinburgh the next evening. Here they put up at another inn, ready to walk to Colinton the following day, if the weather stayed fair.

The morning was bright and dry as Susan and John set out and the sun soon warmed them on their walk. The roadway passed through some poorer hamlets, past cottars scratching in their rigs, with their skinny children crouching by doorways the ever present sign of famine. In the distance, to the east, John saw the castle high on its promontory and Salisbury crags beyond and thought how he could not live again in this city, for each sight, each street would remind him of the sad past and his loss of Isobel.

‘Have you no fears about returning to this place, Susan?’ said John as they rested by the side of the road just outside Colinton.

‘Fears, sir? Ain’t nothing can fright us now, when you thinks where we has been, what we has seen,’ she replied. ‘Besides, I’ve a heap of sweet memories too, alongside the sore ones.’

John knew that she was thinking of the child Willie Jamieson and he too found himself remembering with a wave of longing his time with the children in the schoolhouse only one year ago. The shame of his leaving lurked in his memory too, but this was tinged only with regret that he had not stood up more strongly against the accusations, more boldly challenged and confronted his father’s malice. He was clear in his resolve to see the Jamiesons, attempt a reconciliation with his father and then quit the place for Glasgow or some other city where he could again pursue his vocation.

‘That’s true,’ he said. ‘There are matters I must set straight with my father. But this holds no fear for me now.’

‘Sir, there ain’t nothin’ he can do or say to hurt or harm you now.’

Some time later, they entered the village by the familiar roadway, coming to the mill at the lower end of the village and the half-hidden path leading into Colinton Dell. They passed cottages, following a farm cart which trundled ahead of them. The church was soon in view and then the manse, silent with no sign of life. There was no one about at all, but a young woman in her yard, whom John did not recognise. They passed the church and climbed the hill, past the schoolhouse, hearing a faint chorus of children’s voices reciting their catechism. Then up ahead was the Jamieson’s cottage, the curl of smoke rising from the tattered turf of the roof.

John stood by the door and called for Mistress Jamieson and a moment later she opened it to him.

She was unchanged but stood in the doorway, her eyes wide with surprise. ‘Maister Wyllie?’ she said. Two small faces peeped from behind her skirts. ‘And Susan? Praise God. I cannae believe it. Where have ye come frae?’

‘Mistress,’ said John, removing his hat, ‘we are returned from that terrible venture overseas, to tell the story of those who did not.’

Mary’s mother stared at John for a moment then smiled sadly.

‘Come away in both, will ye,’ she said, while the two small boys scuttled over to the fire.

‘Lord, look at those two littluns’,’ said Susan gazing at the twin boys and crouching down to them. The two small boys tottered towards her.

‘Mary will be gie pleased that ye’ve come. She’s no here at the moment,’ said Mistress Jamieson.

They sat round the Jamiesons’ fire, Susan with both boys on her knee, chuckling and bouncing them with equal delight for all.

‘Mistress, I was with your husband at the end. I promised to come to you with his last words,’ said John.

‘Aye, Mary and me kenned it was comin’, she said. ‘A man came frae Edinburgh tae tell us, three days ago. He tellt us that all the Colinton men were perished. But in my heart I kenned I’d never see my man again.’

‘He gave all his strength and spirit to do well by you, Mistress,’ said John. ‘He bid me tell you that he prized nothing more in his life than you and his children. If he had been spared, he would have provided well for you.’

‘Aye, I ken that. Alec was a good man, a right good man.’ Mistress Jamieson said, her eyes fixed on the fire.

John looked down at where Susan and the small boys were absorbed in playing with a collection of coloured stones, which he recognized as Willie’s.

‘Mistress, has the Company sent you any relief, for it was promised to all widows of those who lost their lives in the venture?’

‘No, Maister, there’s no word of anything. Maister Cullen one o’ the elders o’ the kirk is tae gang tae the city and speak for us all that have lost our men.’

John reached into his pocket and took out a small purse of silver coins which he and Susan had laid by for the Jamiesons and handed it to her.

She took the purse, looking at him, her eyes still full. ‘Thank ye, Maister for your kindness. I cannae hope tae repay –‘

‘There is no need, Mistress. Susan wishes you to have this, for a little good fortune came to her out of this tragedy.

‘Take it, Missus,’ said Susan looking up, ‘for the littluns.’

The widow took the purse and looked back at John, her eyes on the scar on his cheek. ‘Aye Maister, I can see you’ve suffered too.’

She paused and shook her head. ‘Back then, no one in the parish believed it, when the Minister spoke against ye both and sent you away. We’d all such a fear o’ him and the elders. Pardon me, Maister for speakin’ ill o’ a man o’ the Kirk and your father.’

‘There’s no offence, Mistress,’ said John. ‘I’ve come to settle the matter with him and perhaps mend the wrongs of the past. But let’s not dwell on that. I would dearly love to see Mary again, for she and Willie were stars among my pupils. I hope she’s been continuing with her reading and study.’

Mary’s mother looked a little discomfited for a moment. ‘Well, Maister, she didnae go back to the school after you left us, for she’d no liking for the Minister. And many’s the other bairn that didn’t gang, for fear o’ him.’

What John had foreseen had come to pass, his father’s regime of discipline in the school, the same that he had suffered himself as a child. He listened with growing unease while Mistress Jamieson recounted how the Minister had come to be dreaded and loathed by all in the parish.

‘Some o’ the elders o’ the parish have spoke up against him for his cruelty tae the bairns, like Master Cullen for he’s kind man. There’s one wee laddie came home with a crack on his heid. They say he’s never been right since then. There’s others with bruises all over.’

She paused and looked at John, as though to gauge the effect of her comments.

‘Pardon me, Maister,’ she said quietly.

John shook his head, too angered and saddened by this news to make a reply.

‘But Mary hasnae lost her love o’ learning,’ said Mistress Jamieson quickly, ‘for she meets each week wi’ James Vernon tae read the books ye gave the bairns. The lassie has always her face in a book when she’s a moment o’ leisure. They meet in the Dell when the weather’s fair or come here o’ a winter’s night. Ye may catch them by the Witch’s Pool or some such

place the now. But Mary'll no be late home, for I've tellt her. I'll no have folks talking about her. She's a good girl, Maister.'

'I know it well, Mistress. May I go and seek them out?' he said, filled with pride and pleasure to hear such news of his two former pupils.

'Aye, Maister, if ye will. And you may come back and sup wi' us the night. Though we've only kale tae offer, ye're right welcome to share it wi' us. Will ye, Susan?'

John and Susan agreed with gratitude and John felt his heart lift, his spirits rise with hope and admiration for the extraordinary resilience of the Jamiesons. He longed to find Mary and James and commend them for their continued pursuit of reading. With a quick nod to Susan who hardly seemed to notice his departure, so taken was she by the children, he took off in the direction of Colinton Dell.

The light was beginning to fade as John entered the Dell, making his way along the muddy track and through the trees, smelling the dampness of the autumn earth, tramping over the leaves of red and gold as he went. It was quiet and almost still, with only the sound of the occasional bird call or a plop of water in the burn. Then up ahead, through the trees he glimpsed the smooth black water of the Witch's Pool. On one of the large boulders which served as a convenient resting place, Mary and James sat close together, their heads bent over something in their laps. John heard the sound of Mary's voice reading and he strained to catch the words she spoke, though he was too far away to hear properly. His throat tightened with pleasure as he approached but he was loath to interrupt, preferring instead to listen at a distance for at least a moment or two.

He crept carefully along the path, determined not to make a sound, but to withdraw to a suitable place to savour a few private moments in secret in this calm, quiet sanctuary. He stepped through the briars and bracken away from the burn and the pool, skirting the place and finding a thick-trunked tree with a forked branch, where he lodged himself with a partial view of the two young people and just within earshot.

Mary's voice rang out clearly and with fluency as she read and James Vernon leaned back on his elbows staring up at the trees as he listened.

*Now, with a furious blast, the hundred doors*

*Ope of themselves; a rushing whirlwind roars*

*Within the cave, and Sibyl's voice restores:*

*"Escap'd the dangers of the wat'ry reign,  
Yet more and greater ills by land remain.  
The coast, so long desir'd (nor doubt th' event),  
Thy troops shall reach, but, having reach'd, repent.*

‘What like is a sibyl’s voice, dae ye think?’ interrupted James.

‘How do I know, ye daftie,’ said Mary laughing. ‘Haud yer wheesht, will ye, for I want tae finish. She resumed assuming a cracked, witch-like tone.

*Wars, horrid wars, I view- a field of blood,  
And Tiber rolling with a purple flood.  
Simois nor Xanthus shall be wanting there:  
A new Achilles shall in arms appear,  
And he, too, goddess-born. Fierce Juno's hate,  
Added to hostile force, shall urge thy fate.*

‘That’s a fair piece of reading, Mary,’ said James as she paused. ‘I like it fine’

‘Aye,’ said Mary, ‘but perhaps we should read some o’ the scriptures now.’

‘Och Mary, no scripture,’ said James. ‘There’s enough scripture of a Sunday to last more than a lifetime.’

‘You wicked blasphemer,’ said Mary and hit him playfully on the arm.

‘Ouch!’ he squealed in mock terror and leapt to his feet, standing up on the boulder. John saw that James Vernon had grown into a sturdy youth, his shoulders broad and his fair hair thick under his bonnet. ‘All right young Mistress,’ he cried, with a laugh, snatching the bible from her. ‘If ye want scriptures, here’s a wee sermon for you. ‘

He flicked through the pages and then his voice deepened and he raised his arm in a pointing gesture towards Mary.

‘Ye wretched people, take heed of the words of the Lord... “And I stood upon the sand of the sea and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy...”’

John was amazed to hear a horrible likeness of his father's preaching as it boomed from the boy on the boulder.

'Stop,' cried Mary, giggling, 'James, how can ye do it? How can ye make his voice?'

'Silence, you miserable creature,' said James, his voice quavering in an effort to control his laughter and maintain the furrows on his brow.

But suddenly there was a rustling from the trees close beside them and two wood pigeons flapped clumsily out of the branches, startled by something. James stopped speaking and stared towards the path. John raised himself up from his perch and saw to his dismay a figure moving close to the pool. It was the determined gait of the familiar stocky body, the dark coat, grey hair and the hard set jaw of his father, the Reverend Archibald Wyllie. He advanced quickly towards the two, wielding a stout stick and when he was within a few paces of them, thrashed it against the trunk of a tree with a loud crack.

'You dare to mock the word of the Lord,' cried the minister, pointing with the stick at the bible which James still held open in his hand. 'How did you come by these books?'

John plunged through the thick tangle of bracken back towards the pool and the path where his father now stood facing the two young people.

He heard his father shouting. 'Thieving, miserable wretches! You would steal from the house of God? These are the property of the Kirk and you choose to defile them with your wicked blasphemies.'

'Sir,' Mary cried, 'we were gi'ed the books by Master John Wyllie. They were his gift tae us, for our reading.'

John ran, stumbling now, approaching his father from behind and heard him roaring at Mary. 'You impudent girl. You dare to stand there and deny your sin before me and before God.'

'Father,' shouted John, gasping with the effort of running, 'leave them be.'

He saw the faces of Mary and James, eyes wide with astonishment as he came behind his father. The minister turned, his face twisted in angry surprise.

'You?' he cried, aiming a blow with his stick at John's head. John ducked and was caught instead on the shoulder which sent him staggering and falling backwards into the undergrowth. He scrambled to his feet again only to see that his father had advanced on James.

The minister's stick was above the boy, then it was raining blows on him, beating , beating as he lay within inches of the edge of the pool.

Mary was screaming. John rushed at his father, grabbing the arm which held the raised weapon, wrenching it back with all his strength. His father's arm was hard like a rod of iron, but John somehow managed to halt it. He saw his father's curled lip, his eyes full of rage, felt his angry breath in his own face, while Mary crouched over James who lay without moving.

'Maister Wyllie,' cried Mary.

'Father, will you calm yourself –,' John cried, digging his fingers into his father's arm to keep his hold, while his father writhed wildly to pull himself free. 'The books are not stolen. There is no crime. I swear it.'

'You come skulking back here again to defy me,' the minister cried, as the staff fell from his hand, 'to question my authority. Let me to this business or I'll make an end of you.'

'No, father. Listen, I beg of you. In God's name listen to me.'

'Get off. You're no son of mine,' roared the Reverent Wyllie, dragging his hand free and clamping it around John's throat. John's breath would not come. His head was about to explode. He flailed with his arms and caught his father's coat, tugging so that the man's body lurched and swayed and he with it. John felt his foot step into the air with nothing beneath. He was falling, weighted with his father's bulk, then came a freezing crash of water as together they hit the surface of the pool and were plunged deep into its blackness.

Master Richard Cullen was seated at the centre of four other elders of the Kirk. He was a young man to lead the Kirk Session but he addressed the assembled villagers in a tone of undeniable authority.

'We are called today to examine the facts of a tragic event. You all gathered here know of the drowning which occurred just yesterday. We will hear the testimony of witnesses and then consider our judgement about the sad matter before us.'

He looked to each side at the solemn faces of the other elders before turning his gaze to a stout, red-faced man, the miller, who stood in the group before the bench.

'Master Dunbar, I believe that you were one of the first to lend your aid at the pool. Would you give us your account?'

‘Aye and this is my lad,’ said the miller indicating the replica of himself who had risen from his seat as though joined to his father at the hip. ‘Me and my lad, it was got them out and a right struggle we had tae.’

‘Aye, we did,’ said the miller’s son nodding his head energetically.

The chairman of the Kirk Session let slip a sigh. ‘Will you tell it from the start, man,’ he said, not unkindly.

‘Aye well, right you are then,’ said the miller, clearing his throat. ‘So, the lassie Mary Jamieson comes screaming tae our door. She squeals like a stuck pig that there’s folk drowning in the Witch’s Pool up yonder, so I says to my lad tae get the poles and the hooks and make it hasty. And we ganged wi’ the lassie as quick as we could tae the place. ’Twas me and my lad here took out the body,’ he added, glancing round to ensure that all had heard his proud declaration. ‘Aye, we did it wi’ our poles and hooks. They’re right handy for bringing out deid dogs from the pond.’

‘Aye and sometimes there’s rats and cats in there too,’ interrupted his son.

‘Proceed with your account, please,’ said Master Cullen. ‘Go on.’

‘And we come tae the pool and there’s the young Maister Wyllie diving intae the water and the lad Jimmy Vernon sitting at the side, holding his head all fu’ o’ blood. And I says tae the lad what’s afoot, but he’s near senseless. Then up comes the young Maister again for tae breathe and down again, afore we could stop him. “It’s the minister drowning down there,” squeals the lassie. “Get them out.”

‘Then we get to it and pull the young Maister out first. “He’s deid”, says the lassie, greeting her heart out, but I can see that he’s no, and we gie him a shoogle and he coughs up the water.’ The miller paused and his son saw his chance, his ruddy cheeks glowing with this moment of fame and the drama of their story.

‘Then we got him out, the Minister. He was that heavy, I was feart he’d drag me and my da down wi’ him. We pulled him tae the bank but he was a’ready drowned deid.’

‘It was his coat, weighed down wi’ great heavy things in his pockets,’ broke in the miller again. ‘At first we thought it was stones, but then we found it was holy books.’ He bowed his head in a gesture of respect.

‘Aye, took him down tae the bottom like a rock,’ said the son with a flourish.

‘Thank you both,’ said chairman, glancing again at his fellow elders, as the miller and his son stepped back to their places. ‘We should hear from Master John Wyllie himself now.’

John had listened with interest to the millers’ account of the events which to him remained a mainly a blur. He was clear about the circumstances, however, and still deeply shaken by the manner of his father’s death. Master Cullen had a fresh, open face and his pale eyes scrutinised John with curiosity rather than suspicion.

‘Master Wyllie, this is a most distressing cause, one we must probe to discover the truth of the events and the circumstances. There are many here that would swear to your virtue and your blamelessness –’

John heard the murmurs of ‘aye,’ from those who stood behind him in the session room.

‘Mmm,’ said the chairman, ‘but you must give your account before us. Your own father lies drowned and you too near dead in the process. Can you explain what led to it?’

‘Sirs, I deeply regret my father’s death and beg forgiveness from God if my actions led to it. I would not have had it so, on my life. But he was chastising two young people for a theft they had not committed. I had to try and prevent it. I tried to restrain him, but in the struggle we overbalanced and fell into the pool.’

‘And it seems, Master Wyllie, that in spite of your heroic efforts, your father could not be saved.’

John bowed his head, thinking of his vain hope of a reconciliation with his father. It was too late now, nor could it ever have been. His father would never have tempered his views in any way; he would never have changed. John thought of his father’s life of miserable rigorous striving to secure the salvation of his soul, wondering what good had been served by it in the end.

‘Now in this matter of the minister’s accusation of theft, we would invite Mary Jamieson to speak up,’ said Master Cullen.

Mary flushed when all eyes moved to her, though she held up her head and kept her gaze steady as she addressed the stern men at the bench. John noticed how she was grown, taller, her figure changing to the form of a woman.

‘Sir, James and me were reading in the Dell by the pool when the minister came upon us. He thought we’d stolen the books from the school. But we hadnae, for we had them o’ Master John Wyllie who taught all of us tae read.’

‘Wait a moment, young woman,’ said Master Cullen. ‘You say you were *reading* in Colinton Dell with James Vernon? This is hard to believe.’

‘Aye, I know sir, but as God is my witness, it’s the truth. James Vernon and me have a great love of reading. Master Wyllie wanted us tae carry on so he gie’d us a bible and a psalter each and some other books too. I’ll gladly read tae ye here and now, if ye need the proof o’ it.’

Two or three of the elders murmured and nodded to each other and the chairman smiled briefly at Mary.

‘No, Mary Jamieson, that will not be necessary. We have already heard of Master Wyllie’s talents as a teacher. But why did you not tell the Reverend Wyllie this? He was your schoolmaster’s father after all.’

‘We did sir. We tried tae explain it, but it made him worse in his rage. ‘But–,’ and Mary hesitated, turning for a moment to James.

‘Yes, Mary Jamieson?’ said Master Cullen.

‘Well, the minister thought we were mocking the word of God.’

‘And were you?’

‘No sir.’ She coloured deeply and bowed her head.

‘Well, thank you, Mary Jamieson,’ said Master Cullen. ‘You speak well. You’re a credit to your schoolmaster. Now I think we should hear from James Vernon, gentlemen. What do you think?’

As Mary moved back, James stepped forward, with one eye swollen and red, and livid bruises on his cheeks.

‘James, it is admirable in a young man to read,’ said the chairman. ‘Did you continue your studies with the Reverend Wyllie, once his son had left the parish?’

‘No, sir, I didnae care tae.’

Master Cullen’s face registered the trace of a frown. ‘That’s hardly the sign of one dedicated to reading God’s word,’ he said.

‘Aye I ken sir,’ said James, ‘but I read some o’ the Scriptures every day.’ His freckled face reddened. ‘I didnae like the way the minister would shout and beat the wee ones in school, just for no knowing their letters. I didnae gang tae school after Master Wyllie left us.’

There was a pause and silence hung in the air for a moment. The chairman broke it.

‘And you’ll vouch for the truth of all that we have heard today? These injuries are the result of your beating by the Reverend Wyllie.’

‘Aye sir.’

The elders conferred with each other for some moments as John winced at the sight of James’s damaged face, remembering how once he had tried to beat the boy himself.

‘The proceedings are over,’ announced Master Cullen. ‘It seems we have lost our minister, God rest his soul, as a result of a tragic accident. No one is to be held accountable for his death.’ There were murmurs of agreement from the others at the bench. ‘Let us pray for the soul of the departed.’

All bowed their heads as the chairman uttered a short prayer and John felt only a heavy sense of relief.

There was a low murmur of talk as the people departed from the session chamber. John nodded at Mary and James and Susan behind her veil. He turned to follow them, intending to thank them all for their loyalty and their good opinion of him.

‘Master Wyllie, I’d have a word, if you please,’ said Master Cullen, as the other elders rose and left their places. ‘Accept my condolences please, for the loss of your father.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said John. ‘We were not close. I had hoped to mend the breach between us, but that was never to be, it seems.’

‘He was a man unflinching in his nature,’ said the elder, ‘He would spare nobody who crossed him. I know this as one who did.’

‘And I too,’ said John, glad, though surprised, that such a man now had influence in the Kirk Session.

‘I would be pleased if you would dine with us tonight,’ said Richard Cullen, ‘for I have much to enquire about the sad colonial adventure, for I hear you are lately returned.’

‘Thank you, Master Cullen,’ said John, ‘but I fear such a conversation would hardly be amusing. I think I might cast gloom on the company.’

‘Well, I’ll not let us descend into misery, I assure you,’ he said with a smile, ‘my wife will not permit it. And there are other matters to discuss too, notably our need for a new parish schoolmaster.’

Taking his leave of the Jamiesons and Susan who was to lodge with them that night, John walked the mile to the Cullen's farmhouse, a plain two-storey house of stone with a neat yard. Mistress Cullen was a jovial woman, a happy mother of four strapping children, whom she chased to bed with the help of the maid, before setting out a plain supper in their dining parlour.

'Master Wyllie, you are most welcome. Richard has told me of his hope that you might take up your old position here as schoolmaster again.'

John coloured, unable to conceal his surprise and pleasure at this information. 'Mistress, it would be my greatest wish,' he said.

'Aye,' said her husband, 'but I'll needs get to work with the Kirk Session, for there's some would resist it, because of that business with you and the servant woman. Is it true she was with you in Darien?'

'Aye, and I will stand by her honesty and virtue and my own in this matter, before any who would cast dirt at us,' said John, already determining not to stay in a parish where Susan was not welcome.

'There's no need to fear on that count, for we have had such a trail of folk speaking well of you both, I was quite wearied to hear another,' he said with a laugh.

'Richard will have his way,' said his wife, smiling at her husband, 'though he has stirred up strife from time to time with the elders, have you not, my love?'

Richard Cullen returned the smile. 'The Kirk is changing. I think we may not see the likes of your father again. There's change afoot, let me say, a breeze of more liberal thinking.'

'I rejoice to hear it,' said John. 'I cannot regret the passing of his views and opinions, his cruelty in the name of godly discipline. Brutality does not lead to godliness nor violence to goodness.'

Richard Cullen nodded. 'You knew the young man, I believe who died for his blasphemy?' he said suddenly.

'Aye,' replied John, feeling the cold shock which always accompanied the mention of Thomas Aikenhead.

'Such savagery is hard to imagine now,' said his companion.

The evening was a pleasant end to a day of turbulent thoughts. The Cullens, John found, were amiable and liberal with their hospitality and their opinions. He hoped that they would not find themselves too much in conflict with the Kirk, but was much heartened to know of such

allies to his way of thinking. They offered him a bed in their house, but John had arranged to go to the manse to take over the vigil from the village woman who sat with his father's body. He took his leave of them with sincere gratitude and a feeling of calm, laced with a little hope for the future.

The moon, tinged the fields with silver as John walked along the track back towards the manse. The church spire was a black needle against an indigo sky and John heard only the hoot of night birds and the crunch of his shoes on the rough ground as he went. Soon, he had reached the manse and knocked lightly on the door to announce his arrival. He heard the step of someone coming down the passageway and the door was opened by a middle aged woman in black widow's weeds.

'Good evening, Mistress. I thank you for your pains,' said John.

'It was no trouble, Master Wyllie, for he's at peace. God rest his soul.' She handed him a candle and stepped out into the night.

John closed the door after her and made his way through the damp mushroom air of the passageway to the parlour where he lit two more candles to lighten the gloom. He surveyed the bleakness of the room, remembering how it had been in Reverend Wallace's time, a glowing place, lit by the warmth of the old man's friendship and geniality. Next he took a light to see his way to the dining parlour where his father's body lay. The door was ajar and he saw the black shape of the coffin upon the table. He approached slowly, controlling his feelings of dread with the sense of his duty, to look for one last time at the face of his father and to pray for him. In death, his father's countenance had lost its frown but otherwise it was as it had been in life, cold and unforgiving, a manifestation of his heart.

John murmured a prayer. 'May you find peace at last,' he said to the silent face and then crept back to the parlour.

The room was so cold, he decided to light a fire and sit by it in the hope of some rest, as he knew he would not be able to sleep. Finding some kindling, logs and a few coals which might at least lend warmth for an hour or so, he set to and soon had a small but comforting fire in the hearth. He pulled the chair closer. In spite of the fire he was chilled to the core. He knew he must go in search of a rug or plaid or risk freezing. He rose with his candle and made his way to the door of the room, passing a small table upon which lay some books and papers. There was no doubt kirk session business in that pile of correspondence and he thought that he must draw

the attention of Master Cullen to them the next day. He shone the candle near to the papers and on the top, saw something that nearly made his heart stop.

It was a letter, addressed to the Reverend Archibald Wyllie in Morningside parish, with these words scored through and replaced by 'Colinton'. What a ridiculous fancy he thought, a foolish supposition to imagine that he recognised the hand in which the original name and address was written. His weary mind, shocked by the events since his arrival in Colinton, had confused his brain and the sputtering candle did not shed enough light to read by. He stepped out of the parlour and found a chest in the hallway containing a coarse wool rug which would at least lend a measure of comfort against the cold. Returning to the room, he could not resist training the candle over the pile of papers again, though he knew it was madness. He picked up the letter and drew the candle across it, over the neat, even script beneath the later scribbled alteration, then carried it over to the fire where he held it close to the flames.

This was an act of dishonesty, he knew, as he broke the seal. He read the note inside, then his brow prickled with sweat in spite of the chill as he tore open the letter contained within the first.

*Clement Lane, London*

*My Dearest John,*

*If ever you receive this note, know that I am free and still hold you in that deep regard and affection which I felt from the moment we first met.....*

## Chapter 33

London

October 1698

Isobel did not know how long she lay hidden beneath under the filthy clothes. She had no way of knowing whether the man had passed her by and would not risk lifting the thick cover to peep out at the street. The stink of her sordid condition made her ashamed. She had fled like a rat scampering from the blow of a spade to hide in a sewer. That Nicolas Payne should have engaged someone to hunt her down, roused her to bitter anger but she wished no encounter with him. Above her head, she heard the women chattering and the clump and fizz of wood being thrown on to their fire. Her legs and arms grew stiff and the ground hard beneath her, so that she wondered if ever she should walk again.

‘Had a nice little nap, has yer?’ came a voice as a flap of the filthy cloth was lifted from Isobel’s face. The sky was bright and the sun higher in the sky, so she must have lain there for more than an hour.

She stared back at the crumpled face of the woman. She was a creature dressed in all manner of garb, layers of skirt with a soiled scarlet petticoat hung about her lower half and a soldier’s jerkin on top with the braid dangling and a hat of fur covering her wispy hair.

‘Thank you kindly, Mistress,’ said Isobel sitting up for moment and looking around before scrambling to her feet. Only this woman remained of the group with whom she had sought refuge. The street was quieter now, with only a few customers at the traders’ stalls nearby.

‘No trouble, me love,’ said the woman. ‘The others couldn’t wait on yer majesty wakin’ from ‘er beauty sleep, so they’ve scarpered. Here what’s a lovely young gel like you doin’ out ‘ere? Runnin’ away? Here, let me dust yer down.’

The woman set about vigorously slapping at Isobel’s gown and shawl.

‘Thank you again, Mistress. Here’s for your pains,’ said Isobel fumbling for a small purse which hung on her belt and taking out a coin.

The woman eyed it and took it in her palm. ‘Ain’t goin’ to tell me, then? Naughty secret is it? Is you in trouble?’

‘Yes,’ said Isobel, thinking that there was little risk in telling the woman something of her perils. ‘But not in the way you think.’

‘Oh, a Scotch lassie, is yer? I sees it all now. One o’ them wild men from the north come after yer, has he? And here’s you in London town thinking you’ll escape ‘is clutches? Bastards, all o’ them, men,’ she said.

‘Well the one who pursues me is indeed one of those, but he’s an Englishman. And he’d probably call himself a gentleman,’ she said, amused in spite of herself at her companion’s interpretation of her situation.

‘Oh my Gawd, they’re the worst o’ the lot, gentlemen,’ she said with disgust. ‘Well, you get yourself home, me dearie. Go clever and cunning now. God bless.’

‘And God bless you too,’ said Isobel pulling her shawl over her head and setting off back along Throgmorton Lane. She would take the woman’s advice for she knew that guile and deception would be her only means of evading Nicolas Payne. Defiance and fury, should they come face to face, would certainly fail. She hurried through the backstreets, hoping that Monsieur Padeloup’s sympathies would extend to tolerating such lateness. As she ran, her mind churned with plans and schemes for avoiding detection, though in the end she saw the only solution.

The Frenchman and his wife were standing together in the workshop when Isobel arrived. She should not have feared their reaction.

‘Isobel, we were so anxious. You did not come. What has happened?’ said Madame Padeloup. ‘Come sit, I will bring you wine.’

‘Pardon me, please, Monsieur, Madame,’ said Isobel feeling her anguish ebb a little in their reassuring company, knowing that she could tell them all.

Her father, when he heard Isobel’s story, was for a moment silent before a rare anger burst from him.

‘We’ll bear this no more,’ he cried. ‘God, that I had back the strength of my arm to beat that man to Hell. Coming to hound us here in this place.’

Isobel and her mother stared at the bookbinder, for this was an unusual state of rage for him which shocked them. Isobel knew it was born of many things, their previous flights and his impotence against her former employer.

‘Father, calm yourself. I’d dearly like you to puncture his pride, smack his plump face, send him howling back to Cambridge. But listen, I have a plan.’ said Isobel, taking her father’s arm and pulling him to a chair. She had formulated it carefully in her mind during the day. ‘Let’s return to Edinburgh, for hasn’t that been the wish of your heart all along? Would that really be such a terrible thing? Nicolas Payne will not follow us there.’

Her father gave her a curious look then glanced at his wife who stood at their side.

‘We have enough money saved from all of our earnings,’ said Isobel, with an energy born of her new stratagem. We could set up a workshop again, even in another town perhaps. It doesn’t need to be Edinburgh, if there are too many sad memories and too much bitterness there. But we could travel there first of all, could we not?’

David Fletcher’s face broke into a smile and he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. ‘Lassie, lassie what a daughter have I bred. Jean, what are your thoughts on this?’

Isobel’s mother laid her hand on her daughter’s shoulder. ‘I like the idea fine,’ she said quietly.

Then Isobel rose and paced to the other side of the room, for she knew she must tell them of the obstacle in the way of their perfect plan.

‘But there’s one thing I cannot do, desert my kind employers and run away in the night without warning, as once we did. I owe them so much, we all do. I couldn’t abandon them now. They would need time to find a journeyman or at least an apprentice.’

‘Aye, you’re right lassie,’ said David Fletcher. ‘It would be wrong to deceive them or hurt their business in any way.’

‘Monsieur and Madame Padeloup know something of this matter already,’ said Isobel. ‘I know that they will wish us all well and would not stand in the way of our safety and happiness. They are very good people. I’ll seek their advice.’

‘Aye, that’s wise,’ said her father, ‘and I’ll write straight away to Malcolm Souter in Edinburgh. He’ll know of prospects for work in the trade and who knows, folks’ memories of our troubles may be short, though ours be long.’

The next morning, Isobel put on an old black gown of her mother’s and cloaked herself in a brown shawl, leaving for the workshop early, just as the sun was rising. She glimpsed the pink strip of sky from time to time as she took a winding route along obscure alleys and passages, spying out all the time for a sight of the man who had pursued her. She heard the clang of

hooves on the roadway from the few horses and carts bringing vegetables for the markets. She hurried past several beggars asleep in doorways. In her pocket she carried her key to the workshop and hoped that Monsieur and Madame Padeloup would not be alarmed to hear her enter the shop so early and think her a thief. She stole along quickly, seeing the shuttered shops in the street and little sign of anyone else stirring.

Inside the workshop, she locked the door again and breathed deeply with relief. On her bench, lay the piece from the previous day, a small embroidered cover which she knew she could complete with ease in the morning light. She opened the shutters at the back of the workshop and a beam of obliging sun entered and lit up her work. She stitched, head bent over the pattern of silk threads, seeing the fronds of ferns filling the canvas, aware of the tension of her wait for the appearance of her employers.

‘My dear, you are so early this morning,’ said Monsieur Padeloup, when he entered the shop from their apartments. ‘All is well, I hope.’

Isobel rose from her seat. ‘Monsieur, I must speak to you.’

The Frenchman as always examined her seriously before he spoke. ‘Of course, Isobel. It is about the trouble, with your old master, is it not? But wait should you like my wife to hear it too?’

When Isobel told them of her decision to leave her employment, she felt the hurt of her own disappointment like a pain. It cut her sorely too to betray these people who had saved her and her parents from penury, had recognised and revelled in her skills as a craftswoman, prized her almost like a daughter. Tears filled her eyes, but she knew the wisdom of her proposed action and told them of her plans.

‘But this Nicolas Payne will not find you? You will be safe here, my dear. There is no need to leave London. Please say you will not leave us,’ said Madame Padeloup.

‘Ma chère,’ said her husband, looking unusually gloomy, I fear it will not be difficult to find a bookbinder in London. There are many, I know, but he will go to the Guild. He will come here in the end. But Isobel, he can surely not take you against your will and against the will of your father and mother.’

‘I know and it should be true, but he’s so cunning and has such power against others. I would not have you blamed for harbouring me. Monsieur, you don’t know what he’s like.’

Suddenly, Madame Padeloup burst into tears and shocked, Isobel went to her and knelt at her side.

‘Madame, I’m so sorry that it has come to this, but I will stay until such time as Monsieur Padeloup can find another binder. I can stay hid until then. I can stay safe from him for a little while at least. I would not harm your business for all the world. You’ve been so kind to me and I have learned so much of this craft. I’ll never forget the debt I owe to you both.’

‘My dear,’ said Monsieur Padeloup, coming to her and taking her hand, holding it in both of his. ‘It’s true, my customers will miss the exquisite work of one Isobel Fletcher, but do not worry for us. I too have a plan. My nephew Constant has often expressed a wish to come to work in London. Now this is his chance. I can send for him straight away. I think he has not your delicacy my dear, but he is a good enough craftsman. Our business will survive, though it will be poorer for the loss of you.’

‘Madame, I will miss you so much,’ said Isobel, finding herself clasped in Madame Padeloup’s embrace.

‘Your mother and father must come and bid us farewell, before you depart,’ said the Frenchman.

‘Yes, they will wish to take their leave and give their thanks properly and decently,’ said Isobel. ‘And I’ll happily work until your nephew arrives.’

‘Very good, my dear,’ said Monsieur Padeloup. ‘Let me write immediately to Constant in Paris, so that you are not waiting too long.’

Madame Padeloup suddenly rose from her seat and went to the street door of the workshop. She threw the heavy bolt across and turned to her husband and Isobel. ‘We must keep fast the door too, against that man Monsieur Payne,’ she said. ‘We will open it only to our customers.’

Over the next week, Isobel noticed how her mother sang at her sewing since their decision, and how her father moved with more purpose and energy. He had spoken with some of his acquaintances, fellow Scots at the coffee house he frequented. One had promised to contact his brother who was a bookbinder in Loanhead just outside Edinburgh. Malcolm Souter too had returned a welcoming note, inviting the Fletchers to come and lodge with him as soon as they arrived back in the city. He was optimistic, he said about them finding work.

At night, Isobel lay sleeping only fitfully, excited at the prospect of a return to Edinburgh. Sometimes she could not control forbidden thoughts. Perhaps, once in the north there would be a greater chance of discovering news of John, though there was more fear than joy in the anticipation of what she might find.

One morning, ten days after the Fletcher's decision to leave London, Monsieur Padeloup greeted Isobel with the news that his nephew Constant was already arrived in Dover by packet boat and intended to journey to London that day.

'I'm pleased at the chance to meet your nephew before I depart,' said Isobel. 'I must instruct him in the unfinished work, though I'll endeavour not to leave anything undone.'

'I'm sure you will, my dear,' said Monsieur Padeloup with a sigh. 'I just hope that when Constant sees you he will not change his mind. Young men, you know. He might decide that Edinburgh not London is the place for him.'

Isobel blushed and Monsieur Padeloup smiled, going out of the door, back to his apartments. She turned to her work, assembling her materials on the bench and settling quickly to the pages in front of her. She watched her fingers deftly moving the needle and was pleased that she had finished all the stitching work and could start preparing the boards. She heard only vaguely from inside the shell of her concentration, the sounds of passersby on the street outside, the occasionally muffled greeting, or the sound of walking feet.

A knock on the door broke through the film of her concentration and Isobel quickly wound the thread one more time into a tight knot, put down her needle and the leaves and rose from her seat, wondering whether it could possibly be the young Frenchman arriving so early, or perhaps a customer. She heard men's voices outside the door.

'May I ask who is calling?' she said close to the door and a muffled voice replied.

'I have urgent business with Monsieur Padeloup. It is an important commission from Lord Burleigh.'

Isobel turned the key in the lock and admitted two figures in dark cloaks, black hats and curled wigs.

'Good morning, sirs,' she said as the first one, a tall, portly man took a swift step inside the door to stand beside her, where he swept off his hat. Isobel, taken aback by this sudden approach, recoiled from him, clamping her hand over her mouth to conceal a cry as she looked

into the face of Nicolas Payne. Beside him, stood his son whose cheeks plumped into his characteristic smirk.

Isobel's heart beat wildly in her chest and she felt her brow prickle with sweat as she backed away from them. In her mind, she intended to call for Monsieur Padeloup, but found herself unable to summon a sound from her throat.

'Mistress Isobel Fletcher, my betrothed,' said Nicolas Payne grinning, with a slight bow and a wave of his hat. 'My dear, I've been so worried about you. I've not had a moment's peace since you ran away from me, so unexpectedly. If you only knew the trouble it has caused tracking you down. But here you are and lovelier than ever.'

Isobel took another step backwards to her bench and gripped the edge while he stared at her, his small and sunken eyes scrutinising her. She must tame her panic and face him down, she knew. He smiled again without warmth and moved towards her. She felt her breath come fast in the fear of the moment, but then she found another force, a surge of anger at this bulky, swaggering pair who had forced themselves into her quiet space, invaded her life again, unwanted and unasked. Nicolas Payne glanced around the workshop briefly and waved his cane in a circular gesture at the shelves and benches.

'Not bad, not bad. Your master's well set up here, for a foreigner. But were you not content with your old master, Isobel?' There was a sneer in his voice and she saw again the threat of his smile.

'No sir, I was not,' she replied, breathing deeply. She would stand up to him. He would not get his way. She returned his stare, hoping that he did not notice any outward show of the trembling which afflicted her whole body.

Nicolas Payne's smile dropped like a curtain falling from a casement, to reveal a frown, a narrowing of his small, black eyes.

'We had a bargain, my dear. Have you no recollection of our contract?'

'Aye, sir, it was a bargain indeed,' said Isobel in an even tone. 'But I do not remember your son being part of it.'

Nicolas Payne turned to look at Francis who shrugged, his lips pouting. 'I don't know what she alludes to, Father, I'm sure.'

'Your memory is as faulty as your honour then, Master Francis,' said Isobel, holding her voice as steady as she could.

His father turned to Isobel again, assuming the brisk air of one about to resume some talk of business. 'You've caused me much embarrassment, Isobel. I've had to bear the shame of it all, having my affianced depart on the very eve of our wedding. There were many made merry at my expense. It has caused me much pain. I am much displeased by your actions and those of your father....'

'Master Payne,' said Isobel spurred by her growing irritation. 'I'm truly sorry to have caused you distress. But you must know that the bargain was made under difficult circumstances. It was my belief that our leaving would absolve you from any responsibility for me and my parents. I could not live with you as your wife.' She stared at Francis Payne who turned away, affecting to examine a book on the shelf beside him.

'Your father broke his contract with me,' said Nicolas Payne advancing on her. 'I will have him in a court of law for this. You will hold to your side and be married to me, or your father will pay. He'll not escape so easily this time.'

Isobel felt panic rise in her chest at the return of her old dread of the man whose pompous certainty she knew was based on knowledge of his own power.

'Master Payne, this is ungentlemanly of you and cowardly too. You know my father's situation. He is afflicted by the palsy still. I appeal to you, if you ever felt any kind feelings and regard for me, you will release me from this contract. What good will come of pursuing it? You would have a wife who does not love you or respect you and the burden of extra dependants. How could it be your wish to pursue this contract?'

He smiled again and answered with a nonchalant shake of the head. 'Hum, true, but I would have a tasty young creature in my bed. You'd keep me young, my dear.'

Francis Payne snorted.

'Sir,' cried Isobel, 'this is not the place, nor the time to discuss the matter.' She felt her body chill, her courage slip from her. How could she make her escape now? She should have been more on her guard. She should have taken better care until they were well on their way back to Edinburgh.

'We are expecting a visitor from France this morning, and customers too. Monsieur Padeloup my master will be here soon. I must make ready. I have nothing further to say.'

Nicolas Payne laughed again. 'You think you'll escape from me again, eh?'

He took another step towards Isobel, but was suddenly halted at the sight of the inner door from the apartments opening and the appearance of Monsieur Padeloup whose face betrayed only the smallest flicker of surprise. He was dressed as usual in his immaculate black silk coat. He frowned. Isobel saw that Madame Padeloup had also slipped quietly in behind her husband.

‘Messieurs,’ said the Frenchman glancing at the two. ‘I do not think I have had the pleasure.’

Nicolas Payne tossed his head and drew himself up. ‘I am Master of the Worshipful Guild of Bookbinders of the City of Cambridge. This woman, Isobel Fletcher, whom you have been harbouring here, is my betrothed. I have no wish to have converse with you. I merely wish to claim what is mine by right.’

‘Monsieur, it is an honour to meet you. I believe that you are Monsieur Payne,’ said the Frenchman in his inscrutable and even tone.

‘I am indeed, though I prefer to be addressed in English.’

‘I beg your pardon, Master Payne,’ said Monsieur Padeloup bowing, ‘And this young gentleman must be your son. I see much resemblance between you.’

Nicolas Payne stared at him with a look between disgust and surprise.

‘But, sir,’ continued Monsieur Padeloup, ‘allow me to present to you my wife.’

‘I have no wish to meet your wife, my man,’ said Nicolas Payne, striking his cane on the floor. ‘I will say again the purpose of my visit.’

‘Sir,’ said Isobel’s employer in his same steady voice, his narrow face set and determined. ‘Isobel has told me and my wife already of your ‘bargain’, as you call it. It was a most unhappy one, I think, at least on her side. But if you are determined to pursue it, you must meet with her father for a private encounter. This is not the place, for there will be others calling here this morning. Our clients are expected.’

‘Damn you, man,’ shouted Nicolas Payne, his heavy jowls shaking, his face reddening. ‘How dare you. I’ll not be deflected! Francis, guard the door. There will be no other person in here until I’ve done the business I came for.’

With surprising quickness, Francis Payne leapt to the door and threw the bolt across. Isobel heard the metal rasp almost as a blow to her body.

‘Monsieur, I’m so sorry for this trouble,’ Isobel said.

Her employer gestured with his hand that he judged the circumstances unperturbing and of little consequence.

This roused Nicolas Payne to greater fury, though this time, his eyes narrowed as he addressed Monsieur Padeloup.

‘You sir, are a foreigner here, an alien,’ he cried. ‘How, may I ask did you come by your licence to carry on your business in this city?’

Nicolas Payne now moved towards the small figure of the Frenchman, wielding his cane. Madame Padeloup took a step closer to her husband and the two stood their ground, overshadowed as they were by the larger man’s bulk. Isobel felt the sick fear in her belly, thinking for a moment that Nicolas Payne meant to strike her employer.

‘No sir, I beg you, Master Payne,’ she cried aloud, ‘I will listen to your demands.’

He turned to her with a smile. ‘That’s better my dear,’ he said lowering the weapon. He made to reach for her arm just as a sharp knock sounded on the door, which caused Francis Payne who was positioned in front of it, to jolt forward in surprise. Madame Padeloup moved in a few swift steps to the door, and before Francis Payne could respond, she had flung back the bolt and opened the door to a man in a cloak and a hat.

Isobel’s heartbeat calmed a little with the relief at the interruption, knowing that even Nicolas Payne could hardly continue this scene in the presence of a stranger. One look at the stranger as he removed his hat and addressed those assembled caused Isobel to clutch at the bench to steady herself, as a swirl of dizziness flooded her head and the room shifted in swelling movements before her eyes.

‘Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen, pray pardon my intrusion,’ said John Wyllie. ‘I come in search of Mistress Isobel Fletcher.’

Isobel felt his dark eyes on her, knew that he came towards her and then in her half faint, felt his arms about her as he helped her to a chair. She longed for the strength to touch his face, to embrace him as he held her, to prove that he was flesh and blood and not the invention of her hysteria of fear, a vision rising from a fainting fit. He knelt beside her and she saw the texture of his thick black hair, his face, thinner now and bearing a long scar on one cheek. She stared into his face, waiting for it to dissolve before her eyes.

‘John,’ she whispered, her tears coming, unable to say more as she saw in his look such tenderness and love that she could hardly bear it. He grasped her hand and brought it to his lips, still holding her with his gaze.

Then, with her hand still clasped in his, John rose and addressed the company, who stood in silence, staring at him.

‘Again, please pardon me. My name is John Wyllie and I have travelled a great distance to find Mistress Fletcher. She and I have been parted for a long time.’

‘And what claims do you have on this woman?’ blustered Nicolas Payne.

‘Sir, Isobel Fletcher and I are betrothed to be married.’

‘This is falsehood, trickery,’ shouted Nicolas Payne lifting his cane again as his voice rose to something near a shriek.

‘Sir, there is no falsehood,’ said John his voice calm and even. ‘I have been long absent from the country, far overseas. I believe that Isobel thought me dead. But you must know, sir, that I have been pledged to Mistress Fletcher for near two years.’

‘But she’s promised to me,’ cried Nicolas Payne, spit flying from his mouth, while his son’s eyes bulged in disbelief.

‘Sir, I beg your indulgence. You will therefore know the binding nature of such a pledge. But ours was made to each other in the city of Edinburgh, long before she encountered you.’

‘You blackguard! You conniving Scotchman!’ shouted Nicolas Payne, his eyes scanning the others desperately, as though seeking support. Madame Padeloup held her husband’s arm and Isobel thought she saw a flicker of a smile upon her lips. Nicolas Payne stepped towards John, raised his cane and flailed it at his head. But John was quick. Isobel felt his muscles tighten, as with his other hand, he caught the cane mid-air and held it firmly. Isobel found the strength to rise to her feet at John’s side and clung to his arm.

‘Master Payne,’ said John, his voice low, determined and unflinching but with a note almost of tenderness. ‘I humbly beg your pardon for your disappointment and the thwarting of your wishes. I know too well the pain of separation from the woman I love more than my own life. I know too how you must love and admire Isobel too, for her beauty, her skills, her goodness. What man could look at her and speak to her and not be so struck? I’m heartily sorry for your suffering, but my claim is legitimate and of long standing. I understand your anger but

know that as a man of honour you will not stand between two people who have a true bond of love and respect made and sustained over time, as we do.'

Nicolas Payne breathed heavily, his lips puffing out, his face red with rage. He pulled his arm free from John's grasp and the cane dropped to the floor.

'Master Payne,' said Monsieur Padeloup, 'Perhaps we should seek the young lady's opinion, for she is the object of all of this.'

Nicolas Payne said nothing as Isobel spoke, looking at John and finding her voice at last.

'Master Payne, it is true. John Wyllie is the man I love and before you all I declare that it was to him that I first pledged my love.'

No other words were spoken by Nicolas Payne who flung open the door with one last look of fury at John and Isobel. A moment later, he and his son had disappeared.

In the quiet, dark parlour of Monsieur and Madame Padeloup's apartment above the workshop, John and Isobel sat together on the window seat, looking down on the small alley and the occasional movement of people going about their business below.

'John, how can this be happening? Do you think we'll wake up and find that it was all a foolish dream?'

'And if it is, let me have one more kiss before we awake,' he said, taking her in his arms again.

'How did you find me?' said Isobel studying his face, those dark eyes that had haunted her for so long.

'Isobel, it is by a stroke of fate. I found your letter, the one you sent to my father amongst his papers. I took a coach from Edinburgh as soon as I could. This morning I went straight to your apartments and found your parents. They were most kind and forgiving and told me of all that had befallen you. When I spoke to them, I knew then that there was still hope.'

'There were other letters, John, after that terrible one which told you to forget me. After that I wrote to you many times, not knowing where you were, thinking, fearing you dead.'

He took her in his arms again and drew her to him. 'I was so far from you, in the midst of so much hardship and hopelessness. But nothing could make me forget you.'

'What terrible times you have suffered,' she said, stroking his face. 'You have so much to tell me of your adventures.'

‘Yes, my lovely Isobel and so have you. Now at last we will have time.’

‘Will we really?’ she said, ‘How can I know that you will not be snatched from me again?’

‘Because while I live, I will never leave you. Isobel, will you be my wife?’

‘How can you ask that, John, for surely you know the answer?’ she said, kissing him.

‘Isobel, can you ever forgive my insufferable self-righteousness? Can you ever forgive me for Thomas?’

‘Forgive you? It is I who should beg it of you, John. I was so angry and cruel to you, so foolish to cast you off.’

‘And you will truly take me as a husband?’

‘With all my heart and soul. For aren’t we bound now by a contract publicly declared? And here is my private answer,’ she said, kissing him again.

## Epilogue

*The Edinburgh Gazette* January 1730

### Obituary

It is with great sadness that we report the death of Mr John Wyllie, who succumbed to a fever on Saturday. Mr Wyllie was the much esteemed schoolmaster at the parish school of Colinton, a post he held for nearly 30 years. The son of a minister of the Kirk, he graduated with Honours from the University of Edinburgh and started straight away on the course which was to become his vocation. Apart from his reputation and influence as a teacher, he has left a rich legacy in the form of his writing for school pupils, including translations of the best loved stories from classical literature and numerous readers and textbooks. His death was the result of a recurrence of an intermittent tropical fever which he contracted in Darien where he was part of the first ill-fated expedition in the year of 1697.

During his teaching career, he was invited by several of our illustrious schools in the city to take up more prestigious and lucrative posts but instead chose to remain dedicated to the education of country children who had not the advantages of birth and station. An inspiring and dedicated teacher of great gentleness and humanity, he also inspired in his pupils a love of learning and a robust scholarship. At times he found himself in conflict with the more conservative elements of the Kirk, because of his adherence to the principle of the right to freedom of speech and of conscience. He had considerable influence, however, in relaxing some of the strictures of the system of education for the young. He was also a great advocate of education for girls and women. He took delight in the progress of all his pupils, both those whose successes led them to positions in the professions, but equally those whose achievements were of a less scholarly character.

His passing is mourned by Isobel, his wife of 30 years, herself a bookbinder of national repute, and his sons Thomas, an eminent surgeon in this city, Alexander, an engineer and inventor,

currently working in London, his daughter Francine, a poet and writer, and the family's faithful servant, Susan.

*Into your bosom we commend the soul of our dearly departed John Wyllie. Amen.*

by Mrs Mary Vernon