

You promised, Grandmother. You told me that on my 16th birthday you would tell me the story and I am asking you to make good on your promise. It can be my present. I will ask no more of you.

The old woman looked thoughtfully at the smiling face of her eldest grandchild and then turned to the basket of turf beside her chair. She picked up a sod and threw it on the fire where it landed in a small explosion of sparks that were swiftly drawn up the chimney and extinguished. She turned back to face the girl and spoke slowly.

'Yes, I did, although if I am to tell the truth, I had hoped that you would have forgotten. But, as you have said, I gave you a promise and I will keep it. Although, when I have finished, you may wish that you had not asked. Are you prepared to accept that?

The girl hesitated before answering. 'Yes, I am sure.'

'If that is the case then help me up out of this chair. We will walk to the kirk and I will tell you as we walk. It is a long story but I travel slowly these days and there is little else that demands my attention. Fetch my shawl and then let me lean on your arm.

They left the house and began to make their way up the hill as the old woman began to talk.

It is never properly dark on the north-west coast of Scotland on mid-summer day. That sun is visible for almost twenty hours but after it has disappeared below the horizon, a residual glow hangs on the sky, lighting up the shore, the hills, lochs and rivers.

The rider had used this to find his way over the rough roads to the village of Harking, arriving just as the red disk peered above the horizon for the first time. He stopped in front of a house, one of a score or more that clustered around the small harbour, and banged sharply and insistently on the door.

He gave it half a minute before restarting, this time beating the wood with the pommel of a blackthorn cane. He stamped his feet on the ground to shake off the chill of the early morning as he heard movement from inside the house. He waited and then heard a voice from over his head. He stepped back and looked up. A window was open and from it peered the face of a man dressed in a white cotton shift, his narrow face showing alarm and fright. These were dangerous times and to find someone banging on the door in the middle of the night was seldom a precursor to good news or fortune.

'Who's there?' he asked. 'Who disturbs my sleep at this ungodly hour?'

There was anger in his voice but the messenger was unperturbed.

'I bring a message from Lord Sulton, McTaggart. You and your wife are to come immediately.'

'Can it not wait?. We are to be there tomorrow. What can be so pressing?'

'It is not my business to know my Lord's mind. All I know is that it is a matter of great urgency and it cannot wait. His carriage is but a half an hour behind me. Get yourself dressed and be ready to move when it arrives.'

A woman's face appeared at the window behind McTaggart. Like her husband, she appeared to be of middle years but, whereas he was thin underneath his nightdress, she was broader and an

ample bosom pressed up against her husband's back as she leaned over him to catch a glimpse of their visitor.

'What is it, Alken?' she asked. 'What does he want?'

The man pushed back against her weight and turned to face her.

'It's Lord Sulton. He demands that we go with this man. The carriage will be here shortly. We must hurry.'

The messenger saw the woman's face drain of colour and then watched both of them disappear inside the house. He settled down to wait.

They appeared at the front door as the carriage arrived. By this time the commotion had drawn a small audience. Several people hung out of windows in the surrounding house watching the events silently, knowing better than to interfere, and a number of early risers, mainly fishermen, also surveyed the proceedings with interest. McTaggart and his wife got into the carriage without speaking and it turned and sped eastwards. The messenger mounted his horse and followed.

'What will Sulton want, Alken?'

'It must be Jeanie. It can't be anything else. She must have done something to displease him.'

'She's not going to run out on him, is she? After everything we've been through.'

'Not if I have anything to do with it, Moira. We have gambled everything on this and we're almost there. I won't see it lost now.'

It took the carriage almost an hour to reach Ardcairn Castle, once the home of one of the great Highland chieftans, but now occupied by the descendant of a man who had chosen the right side in the Jacobite rebellion. The horses' hooves clattered on the wooden bridge over the moat and the carriage was halted in the central courtyard. They were led to the entrance to the tower and up the stairs to the Great Hall.

Sulton was waiting for them, sitting in a large chair in front of the open fire. He didn't get up as they entered but indicated that they should sit on two smaller chairs which had been placed in front of him. They did as they were told and he looked at them over the rim of a pewter goblet which he was twisting in a circle through his fingers. He was slumped down, his legs stretched out in front of him, and looked both tired and angry. McTaggart knew that he was in his early thirties, although he appeared to be older; his hair had started to recede and his face was beginning to show the effects of a dissolute lifestyle. But he was tall and retained some of the liveness of youth, as well as the sharp nose and thin, hard lips which he had inherited from his father.

He sat up slowly and put the goblet on a table. He looked for a further moment at his visitors before speaking.

'Your daughter is making things very difficult and I want you to sort out the problem. We have an agreement. Let me remind you of what that is. When she and I are married, you will get the rights to collect the rents and to buy and sell all the fish that is landed on this estate. If you manage that

properly, your family will become wealthy. But if Jeanie and I do not marry, you will spend the rest of your lives living in that miserable hovel and selling beer to anyone who'll darken your door. Am I correct?'

His audience nodded their heads and he continued.

'She is in her chamber and refusing to go along with what we agreed. She won't let me through the door and swears that she'll throw herself out the window if I go near her. Go to her now and make her change her mind. I have over a hundred guests arriving for the wedding tomorrow and it had better go ahead. My Steward will take you to her room. Follow him and do what you have to do.'

He clicked his fingers and a man appeared from a doorway behind him. He waited for the McTaggarts to stand and walked from the room. They followed and the little procession went up the stairs to the second floor. The Steward stopped in front of a door, pointed at it wordlessly and left.

They stood silently in front of the door for almost half a minute without moving. Then the woman stepped forward and knocked firmly.

'Jeanie, are you there?'

There was no answer and her husband knocked also, louder, stronger and more insistently.

'Jeanie, it's your parents. Open the door, now.'

They were answered by a voice from the room. 'It's not locked. You can come in if you want.'

Alken McTaggart took the heavy iron ring in his hand and twisted it. He heard the bar on the other side lift and he pushed. The door opened and he and his wife entered the room.

Their daughter sat on a chair in front of the tall window which provided the light for the room. She stood as her parents entered and they stopped as it occurred to them, not for the first time, how it was that they could have, together, produced a thing of such exquisite, tender beauty. She was tall and slim and her full-length ivory coloured dress was fashionable, if one followed what was happening in the great cities; a thing of soft, lightweight muslin, gathered just under the breasts, with a low square neck and shoulder line, and small, short, puffed sleeves. The colour was suited to her pale complexion and the ebony-black hair which framed her face as it tumbled across her shoulders. She held herself with a regal dignity, straight-backed and proud but the mouth that normally held a smile was tight with rage and the wide, open eyes that usually gazed out on the world with amazement and joy were clouded with sadness.

'So,' she said, her voice flat and but filled with contempt, 'he whistled and you came running.'

Her father felt a surge of anger which he struggled to bring under control.

'Jeanie,' he said, 'what the hell is happening? What have you done?'

The girl raised her chin defiantly. 'I have told him that I will never marry him. I'd prefer to be dead first.'

'Listen girl,' said her mother, 'there will be none of this rubbish. We have made a good match for you. Lord Sulton is one of the richest men in Scotland. He could have had his pick of the daughters of the wealthy and the powerful, but instead, he chose you. You can rise yourself out of poverty with this marriage. Look at that dress you're wearing. It cost more than we make in a year. For God's sake, see sense.'

‘Damn your hypocrisy, mother,’ Jeanie replied bitterly. ‘This isn’t about me. It’s about you and your ambitions. I’m just something you’ve sold so that you can get what you want. And for this dress, I did not choose it. It is for the simpletons that walk the streets of Edinburgh and Glasgow, giggling over their fans, desperate to catch the eye of any man with money. It is not fit for a woman who is content to work if she is to live.’

‘Don’t be stupid, Jeanie,’ said her father. ‘What is it that you want? There is no dignity in poverty. You have a chance to be something now. What will happen if you refuse Sulton?’

‘I’ll marry Annachie Gordon. I’ve promised myself to him and he to me. We are to be wed when he returns.’

Her father threw up his hands. ‘Annachie Gordon, Annachie Gordon. That’s all we’ve heard for the past two years. Who in God’s name is he? He does not have two farthings to rub together. His father is nothing but a labourer and that’s all he will be as well. Sulton owns a hundred thousand acres, a dozen villages, three castles and an estate in England. He runs a herd of a thousand cattle over these hills. What does young Annachie have other than a bonny face? If you throw your lot in with him, you’ll spend your life being pulled through a gutter. Will you, for God’s sake, look at what you’re being offered here.’

Jeanie’s face set in stone. ‘I love Annachie and I’d prefer to beg for my bread with him rather than live in in this gilded cage with Sulton. And it doesn’t matter what our Lord and Master offers. He can put gold on my head and down to my knees and it will make no difference. I’ll die before I marry him. And Annachie will not always be poor. He has written to me not three weeks past to say that he is returning from the whaling with a purse full of money. We are going to leave this wretched place and make our own lives.’

There was new steel in her father’s voice when he spoke. ‘You will marry Lord Sulton girl, and you will be his wife. You will do as he says and you will have his children. The time for argument has passed.’

‘I will never marry Sulton. I have told you; I would prefer to be dead first. And I will not carry his children. My sons and daughters will be fathered by the man that I choose and I will not put myself in a position where I have to bow to them.’

Moirá took two steps towards her and raised her right hand, bringing it sharply towards her daughter’s cheek. Jeanie’s left arm went up and blocked the blow. Her mother’s face registered shock at the further display of defiance and the two women locked eyes, but it was the older woman who dropped her gaze first. Jeanie pushed her arm away contemptuously and then spoke slowly and carefully to her parents.

‘I am nineteen years old and beyond your control. I have made my decision. Now leave this room. Tell Sulton what I have said.’

‘These are but the tricks of a whore, Jeanie,’ her father said, spitting his words out venomously. ‘Sulton cares very much for you but you have sought only to insult him.’

‘Sulton cares nothing for me Father. He cares only for what I look like. I have always considered it a blessing that nature favoured me, but now I see that it is a curse. He intends to marry me and to take me to his bed. But afterwards, when he has had his sport, he will lock me away in this castle, away from his fine friends who would only laugh at me and my kind. He will treat me like a broodmare while he drinks and whores his way through the brothels of Glasgow and London. I know the make of

man that he is. He will ill-use me if he gets the chance but I will not give it to him. And shame on you that you would give your daughter to such a man for your own gain. You are little better than merchants of flesh and if I allow it to happen then I am no better than a slave.'

These were words which could never be unsaid and the silence which followed filled the castle. Alken McTaggart turned on his heels and left the room, closely followed by his wife, who pulled the door shut behind her. Jeanie sat back in her chair to await developments.

'Well,' said Sulton when they returned to the Great Hall, 'what can you tell me?'

The McTaggarts looked at each other and it was Alken who spoke.

'She says that she will have none of it, my Lord. She will not marry you. She claims to be in love with a local boy who has gone away to make enough money to allow them to marry.'

'What is this boy's name?'

'Annachie Gordon, my Lord. His father is a labourer on your estate.'

'Not any longer he isn't. I will give orders that he and his family are to be evicted. But in the meantime, what are we to do about this problem?'

'I don't know, my Lord,' said Alken. 'She is a woman of strong will and she simply will not do what we tell her.'

'Then,' said Sulton, 'you had better come up with a plan quickly, or it will go badly for you.'

Moirra stepped forward and said, 'I think I know how to deal with this, Lord Sulton.'

Within the hour the carriage was on its way back to Harking. Two more families were woken from their sleep and their daughters told to make themselves ready for a journey. By the time the village was fully awake, the girls were being pulled roughly up the stairs to the Great Hall at Ardcairn. They huddled together in the middle of the room as Moirra McTaggart held a series of dresses up in front of them until she found two that looked as though they were the right size. She gave them to a servant, ordering that the girls be taken away to be fitted and that they were to return within the hour.

At the same time, Sulton was in the small kirk within the castle in which his family had worshipped for three generations. He was speaking to the Minister and laying down the law.

'We're bringing the wedding forward to this morning, Mr Hutton. I expect you to make yourself ready.'

The Minister was a small, bald, rotund man of middle years and nervous in the presence of the person who controlled his living. His face was still red from the exertion of running from his home following Sulton's summons and his upper lip was sheened with sweat.

'T-t-this is most irregular, my Lord,' he said, stuttering. 'I have other commitments this morning and you have guests arriving from all over Scotland later today. They will be disappointed.'

'I don't care a damn for what my guests think,' snarled Sulton. 'I will be married this morning and I want you to do it. The girl's parents are preparing her and I want you to be ready outside this door at ten o'clock to do the vows. Is there going to be a problem with that?'

The Minister hesitated and Sulton shoved his face within six inches of his and asked again, each word slow and deliberate.

‘Is.....there.....going....to....be.....a.....problem.....with....that?’

Resistance crumbled and Hutton dropped his eyes.

‘No, my Lord. There is not going to be a problem. I will be ready.’

The McTaggarts were not having it so easy. They were in Jeanie’s room and her mother had just told her what was being planned. Without a word, their daughter stepped on the chair and unlatched the window. She threw it open and got her right foot onto the ledge before her parents caught hold of her. Her father shouted for help and two stout women burst in through the door.

It took the combined efforts of all four of them to get her to the bed and to hold her down. Her mother called again and another woman appeared holding a long, multi-coloured dress of the type that was the preferred attire of west Highland brides. She stepped hesitantly into the room, watching the struggling girl as she rained curses down on her parents. Her face was drained of colour and as Moira McTaggart watched, a single tear rolled down her face.

Moira shouted, ‘Come in girl and help us. Put the dress on the chair.’

The woman froze and then threw the dress on the floor. She ran from the room and they could hear her footsteps clattering on the wooden stairs.

Moira turned to her husband. ‘You must leave Alken. What will happen here should not be seen by a father. Go to the basement and send some of the women to help us.’

He released his grip on his daughter and did as he had been ordered.

At a few minutes before ten that morning, a melancholy group gathered in the great hall. Jeanie stood ramrod straight between her parents, a bouquet of hill flowers in her hands, her face stiff and emotionless. Behind her stood the two girls who had been taken that morning from the village. Both were crying softly, heads bent, shoulders shaking. Jeanie turned to them and spoke softly.

‘Do not weep, my good friends. There is little you can do now. All I ask of you is that you bear witness to this day and the evil that is to be done.’

She turned and stared straight ahead, refusing to look at her parents.

‘Let us go and have this finished.’

They walked down the stairs to the courtyard and made their way to the kirk.

A room had been set aside at the castle as the wedding chamber. Jeannie and her bridesmaids entered alone. She sat on the bed and threw the flowers at the window. The girls stood silently, their tears now spent, their faces blotched and red.

‘You did not say your vows, Jeanie. The marriage is not legal.’

‘You know as I do, Laura that that counts for nothing. The marriage certificate is signed and the witnesses that matter will swear that I acted of my own free will. There is nothing to be done now. I ask only one thing of you. Will you go to the room where I stayed last night and fetch my small black bag. It is under the bed. There are things in it that I will need. When that is done, ask that you be allowed to return to Harking.’

Laura did as she was asked and returned with the bag. Jeanie stood and hugged both girls and then ordered them to leave. When they had done so, she sat on the chair in front of the fireplace and waited.

Sulton appeared half an hour later. He closed the door behind him and looked at his new bride. Man and wife gazed at each other in silence and then he walked deliberately to the bed and sat down.

‘Come over here, Jeanie,’ he said. ‘We are now married and the marriage must be consummated. You are my mistress and you have your duties.’

She stared into the fire and considered this statement for a moment before answering.

‘It is of no importance whether I am to be known by my given name or as your mistress, Lord Sulton, but I will never lie in your bed. If our marriage is to be consummated then you will have to take me by force and I doubt that you are man enough to do that.’

Sulton’s face turned red with anger.

‘You will do as you are told, girl. You have your duties and by God, you will do them.’

‘Or what, my Lord? Or what? You should know that the hatred which I have for you is beyond all knowledge and that I am determined that you will never have me. That is the way of it.’

Sulton’s face reddened with rage. He stood up and stormed out of the room. Five minutes later he reappeared with her father who was dragging Laura behind him.

‘Do what you have to do,’ shouted Sulton. ‘Make her understand that she is my wife and she must do as I say.’

McTaggart turned to Laura and spoke. ‘Go to her girl and loosen her gown. Do it now.’

Laura buried her face in her hands. ‘As God is my witness,’ she screamed, ‘I will not be part of this thing. It is evil and your souls will rot in hell for what is happening here.’

Jeanie could take no more. She had resisted for so long but now she felt her resolve and strength dissolve. She stood up from her chair and threw herself at her father’s feet. She looked up at his face and beseeched him.

‘Look at me, father. What you have done is an evil thing. Can you not see that I am dying for the love of Annachie. Please, for the love of God, let me go?’

It was two days after mid-summer and a small barque was making use of the high tide as it navigated its way into the harbour at Harking. Two men stood still on the deck as the ship buzzed with activity around them. It was the older one who spoke.

‘Well, Mr. Gordon, it’s a long road that you have travelled. I hope that it was worth it.’

'It was indeed, Captain. I am to be married to a girl that I love well and I promised her a better life than we had been offered by our own parents. I have the means now to give us a start.'

He turned as the gangplank thudded against the dock and held out his hand.

'Goodbye, and thanks for all that you have done for me.'

The two men shook hands and Annachie threw his bag over his shoulder.

He was half-way down the gangplank when he saw the two girls waiting for him. They were holding each other's hands, their faces streaked with tears. He slowed his pace and stopped until a rough voice behind him said, 'Move lad or I'll do it for you.'

He walked on until he stood in front of them. He dropped his bag to the ground.

'Laura, Shona, what has happened? Where is Jeanie?'

It was Shona who spoke, her voice halting and strained.

'You have been away too long Annachie. Jeanie is dead. Her parents forced her to marry Lord Sulton and she took her own life two days past.'

Annachie Gordon had witnessed the impact of the harpoon as it struck the whales. He had seen the tremor and the shudder in the great bodies and now he imagined that he understood the impact it must have had on the beasts. He felt paralysed as the shock took hold of his body. He was only vaguely aware of the hustle and bustle going on around him as the ship began to unload its cargo but it seemed to be in another world, not the one to which he had been suddenly and cruelly transported by pain and grief. With a huge effort of will, he steadied himself and held out his hands to the women.

'Take me,' he said, 'to where she is lying, so that I might see her.'

The kirk was located on the edge of the village. As they made their way, the people they passed stopped and stared at him. A few turned and followed so that, by the time they got there, a small procession had formed.

He entered and went to the open coffin. Kneeling beside it he prayed for a minute and then stood to stare at Jeanie's face. He stood silent and still, knowing that this look and its memory would have to last him a lifetime. Eventually, he bent down and kissed her lips, feeling their coldness, remembering with a pain he could hardly stand, their warmth and strength. He straightened and returned to the door and addressed Laura and Shona.

'Tell me what happened,' he said.

They looked at each other and Shona nodded. Laura began to speak. She had rehearsed the story and she told her tale without interruption.

'It began a few months after you left. Lord Sulton was passing through the village and he saw Jeanie. A few days later a message came from the steward at the castle to her parents to say that there was a position available to work in the kitchens and they should send her. She left the following day but was back within a month, on foot and very distressed. She claimed that Sulton had tried to

rape her. Several days later, her parents received a summons from the castle and when they returned, they announced that Sulton wanted to marry her. We know that he made them some sort of offer but nobody knows what it was. Jeanie refused; she said that she'd prefer to rot in hell before she would marry him. But her parents pressurised her and three days ago Sulton's coach arrived in the village. We saw Jeanie being bundled into it and then we were told that she was to be married two days later. Later that day, Sulton's steward came to the village and told us that we were to be bridesmaids and that we were to make sure that we were ready when the time came. We should have refused but we were fearful for Jeanie and we did not want her to be alone; so we agreed.'

She paused, waiting for some show of anger or disappointment from him but he remained impassive.

'Go on,' he said.

'Two days ago, Jeanie's parents were summoned to the castle at an early hour. Later that morning the coach also came for us. We were taken to the castle and forced to put on bridesmaids' dresses. Then we were marched to Jeanie's room. She was in great distress and told us that she had refused the marriage and her mother had forced her into the dress that she was wearing. We were then marched to the kirk and the marriage vows were read. Jeanie refused to say anything but the Minister went ahead with the ceremony. He was terrified of Sulton and was almost in tears himself. Afterwards, we were taken to the bridal chamber in the tower. Jeanie was very calm by this stage and she asked me to go to the room where she had been held the previous night and to fetch a small black bag that she had placed under the bed. I did as she asked.'

Laura paused and then whispered, 'I wish to God now that I had not done so.'

She began to lose control and Annachie saw her eyes fill with tears. He reached out a hand and touched her shoulder gently.

'It's all right, Laura. Take your time and finish the story. There is no blame for you or Shona in this.'

She nodded her gratitude and took a moment to compose herself before continuing.

'When I returned, she took the bag and put it under a pillow. Then she asked us to leave. Less than an hour later, as we were preparing to depart there was a commotion and Sulton came storming into the Great Hall, calling for Jeanie's father. He grabbed him by the arms and shouted something at him. They were at the other side of the room and I don't know what was said, but Alken then ran over to me, took me by the arm and pulled me away. The three of us marched to the bridal chamber and Sulton burst in through the door. Jeanie was sitting on a chair in front of the fire and her father ordered me to go to her and loosen her gown. I refused and called down a curse on both men. Jeanie stood up and threw herself at Alken's feet. She looked up at him and I have never seen such pain on a human face. She said to her father that her love was for you and you alone and that she would die for it.'

Annachie breathed deeply in an effort to control his emotions. 'I am grateful that you have told me, Laura. What happened then?'

'Alken bundled me out of the room. I waited outside the door and I heard a vicious argument. I couldn't make out the words but at one stage I heard someone being slapped. I do not know who struck her but within a minute both men left the room, looking furious. Sulton locked the door behind him and dragged me away. And that was the last time anyone saw her alive. We were told to stay and so we waited in the Great Hall. Two hours later Alken went to her room and she was dead. There was

terrible pandemonium and I managed to get into the room to see her. She was on the bed and, from the state of the sheets, it was clear that she'd had convulsions before she died. The bag that she had asked me to fetch was on the floor and I picked it up. There were leaves in it that looked like those of wild parsley. I slipped one of them into my pocket and asked the healer what they were when we returned to the village. He recognised them. She had eaten hemlock.'

Shona spoke up. 'It means Annachie, that she had prepared for what might happen. She had always intended that she would die before submitting to Sulton.'

He nodded slowly and then asked, 'What of her parents? Where are they?'

'They remain at Ardcairn,' said Shona. 'They will return for the funeral tomorrow but they will not dare show their faces in this village afterwards. Jeanie was well loved and there was a lot of anger locally. There is no place for them here now.'

He took their hands in his and squeezed them gently.

'You have done well,' he said, 'and I am grateful. You were good friends to Jeanie. But now I will leave you. There is much for me to do.'

He dropped their hands and walked past them, back to the village.

He stopped at the door of his parent's house, giving his eyes time to adjust from the bright sunlight to the dark interior. He stepped inside and his mother turned from her work at the fireplace. She stood up and faced him, taking a while to appreciate that the boy who had left the village a year before had filled out and become a man.

'You have heard,' she said, a statement, not a question.

'Yes. Shona and Laura saw me on the boat as it came in and were waiting for me when I got off. They told me what happened and I have been to see her at the kirk.'

'There will be someone else, Annachie. It may not feel like that now, but there will be.'

His father appeared, standing by the door of the bedroom. He watched them but stayed silent.

Annachie shook his head. 'No, mother, there will not be another. Not like Jeanie. We made promises to each other and it was those that sustained me through the hardships of the Southern Ocean and the whaling ships. And she preferred to die rather than break those promises.'

'What are you to do then? There can be no future for you here.'

'I must go to Sulton and her parents. They cannot be allowed to get away with this crime.'

His father spoke for the first time.

'Sulton is in his castle, Annachie, and he is unreachable. He has committed no crime in the eyes of the law and even if he had, you know as well as I do that the law confers protection only on the rich and the powerful. It will not help you.'

'Am I to do nothing then, father? Jeanie is dead because of Sulton and her parents. Are they to be allowed to walk away without any consequences?'

'God will be their judge. They will answer when they meet him.'

‘What use is God to me now? And to Jeanie. What kind of God is it that allows this thing to happen? There is no God in this place.’

His father’s voice rose in anger.

‘That is blasphemy, Annachie and I will not have it in this house. You will leave now.’

‘You are within your rights to demand that, father. But I reserve the right also seek revenge on my terms and not leave it to god.’

He turned to leave the house but his mother’s voice stopped him at the door.

‘Annachie, please listen. You are my only son. I care for you more than anyone in the world. But Sulton is powerful and wealthy. You cannot fight him and hope to win. There is only one way that it can end.’

He spoke without looking at her.

‘There is no winning and losing in this mother. There is only shame and pain. If Jeanie could not live without me, then I cannot do so without her.’

He borrowed a horse from an uncle who handed the animal over reluctantly.

‘It is a foolish thing that you are doing, Annachie. You cannot win this fight.’

‘That is a conversation which I have already had with my own parents, Duncan. But I am not wanting to win. I want only to make those responsible pay for what they have done.’

‘It is more likely that it is you who will do the paying.’

Annachie mounted the horse and left without answering. He rode out of the village in the direction of Ardcairn. Those who saw him watched him in silence and nobody tried to stop him.

They had reached the kirk. The Minister was at the gate and he looked at them keenly before addressing the older woman.

‘It’s a fine day, Laura. I’m pleased to see you. It has been a long time.’

‘And I’m not attending now, Calum. I am taking my granddaughter to see the graves. She has asked me to tell her the story.’

The Minister made little attempt to hide his disappointment, but he touched his cap in respect and held the gate open to allow them to pass through. They turned left before the front door and walked around the back of the building, the old woman stumbling on the uneven ground and leaning heavily on the girl.

The graves were in the far corner, close to where the branches on an old oak swayed gently in response to a soft breeze. The silence was broken only by a small bird hidden amongst the leaves claiming its territory and they stood silently for a few moments. Almost everyone who had known and loved the people buried there were now ghosts themselves and there was nobody left who cared enough to maintain the plot. It was overgrown with brambles, and nettles and dandelions had found a home in the soil.

The girl felt a shiver run down her spine and she shuddered slightly before she spoke. 'How did it end then?'

'Annachie found a sword from somewhere. Possibly from a friend in one of the Catholic families hereabouts. Some of them still had Jacobite sympathies and were ready for the return that never happened. He got to within a mile of the castle when he was met by Sulton's steward and half a dozen men. They had heard of his return and were waiting for him. They gave him a terrible beating before tying him to the horse and bringing him back to the village. He was able to attend the funeral the next day but only with a strong man supporting him on either side. Jeanie's parents came as well but they needed a bodyguard of Sulton's men to keep them safe. That was the last anyone saw of them. We heard later that they had been given a position on his English estates. The night of the funeral their house was torched and nobody lifted a finger to quench the fire.'

'And what about Annachie and his family?'

'They were allowed to stay. Sulton knew that he risked rebellion if he did anything. But Annachie himself went slowly mad. In his day, he'd been the bonniest lad for miles around and all the girls were after him, but afterward, bitterness and anger took hold of him. It was like he had the mark of Cain. Even if he'd shown interest in any of the local lasses, they wouldn't have touched him. The spring after Jeanie was buried, he left the village and started to live wild on the moors. Someone would see him occasionally but he shunned human contact, even that of his parents and sisters.'

'But that wasn't the end of it?'

'You are right. Later that year Sulton was shooting grouse on the moors with a group of men who had travelled up from Edinburgh. He was found at the end of the day slumped down in one of the butts with a knife sticking out of his chest. Everyone knew who was responsible but it took the soldiers three days to track him down. When they eventually cornered him, he knew that there were only two ways that it was going to end, and one of them involved him dancing at the end of a rope. He took the other way and threw himself off a cliff.'

The simple headstone that stood sentry over the grave was still upright, although the words carved there were partially hidden by lichen. The girl stepped forward and rubbed it off with her hand. Two names emerged and, underneath them, an inscription. She stepped back and read the words out loud.

'I loved you and you me and our love did not die with us.'

Laura said, 'When they recovered his body, they found a piece of paper in his pocket; almost like a last will. He asked to be buried with Jeanie and for that inscription to be placed on the stone. Everyone in the village put money into the pot to pay for it.'

She paused and then continued. 'This will be my last time visiting here. I am pleased now that you asked to be told. It means that the memory of what happened will not die. But there is nothing more to be said. You should take me home to my fire.'