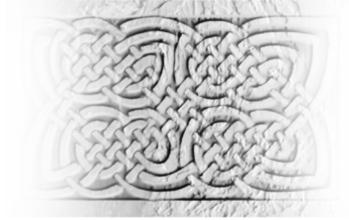




Grace in Thine Eyes

LIZ CURTIS HIGGS

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF THORN IN MY HEART



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GRACE IN THINE EYES

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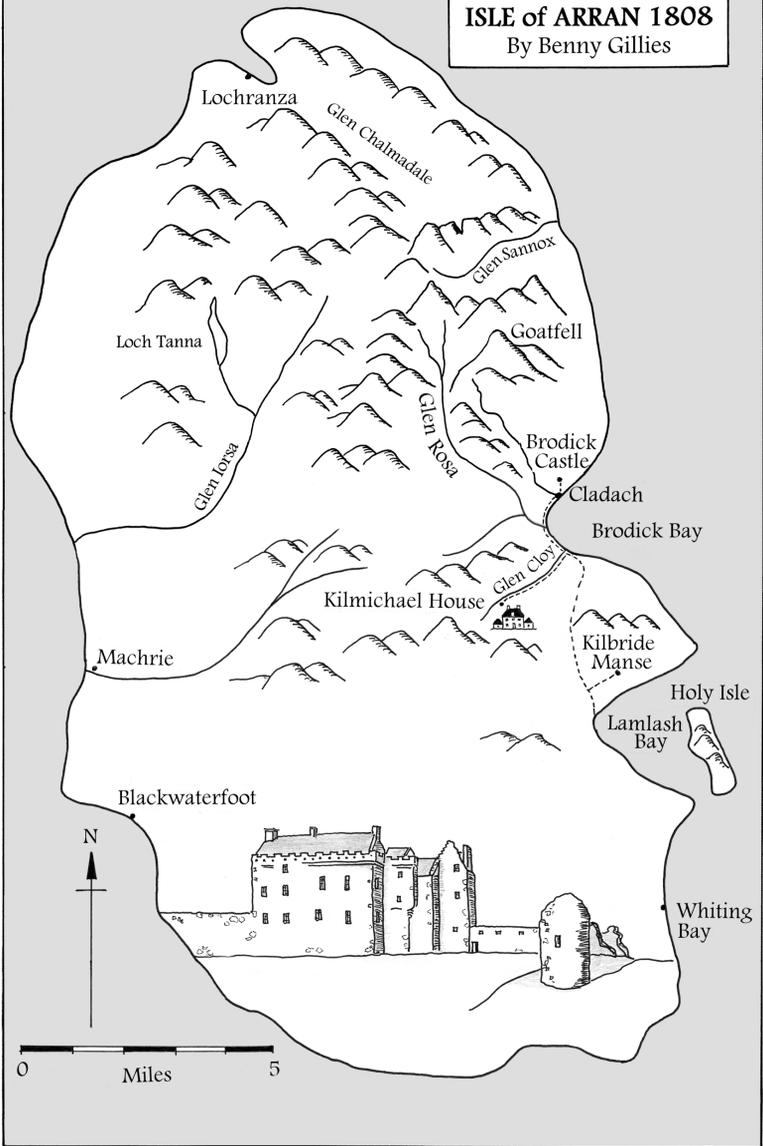
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*To Carol Bartley,
gifted editor
and precious friend.*

*Your patience,
encouragement,
thoughtful direction,
and unwavering faith
are blessings beyond measure.*

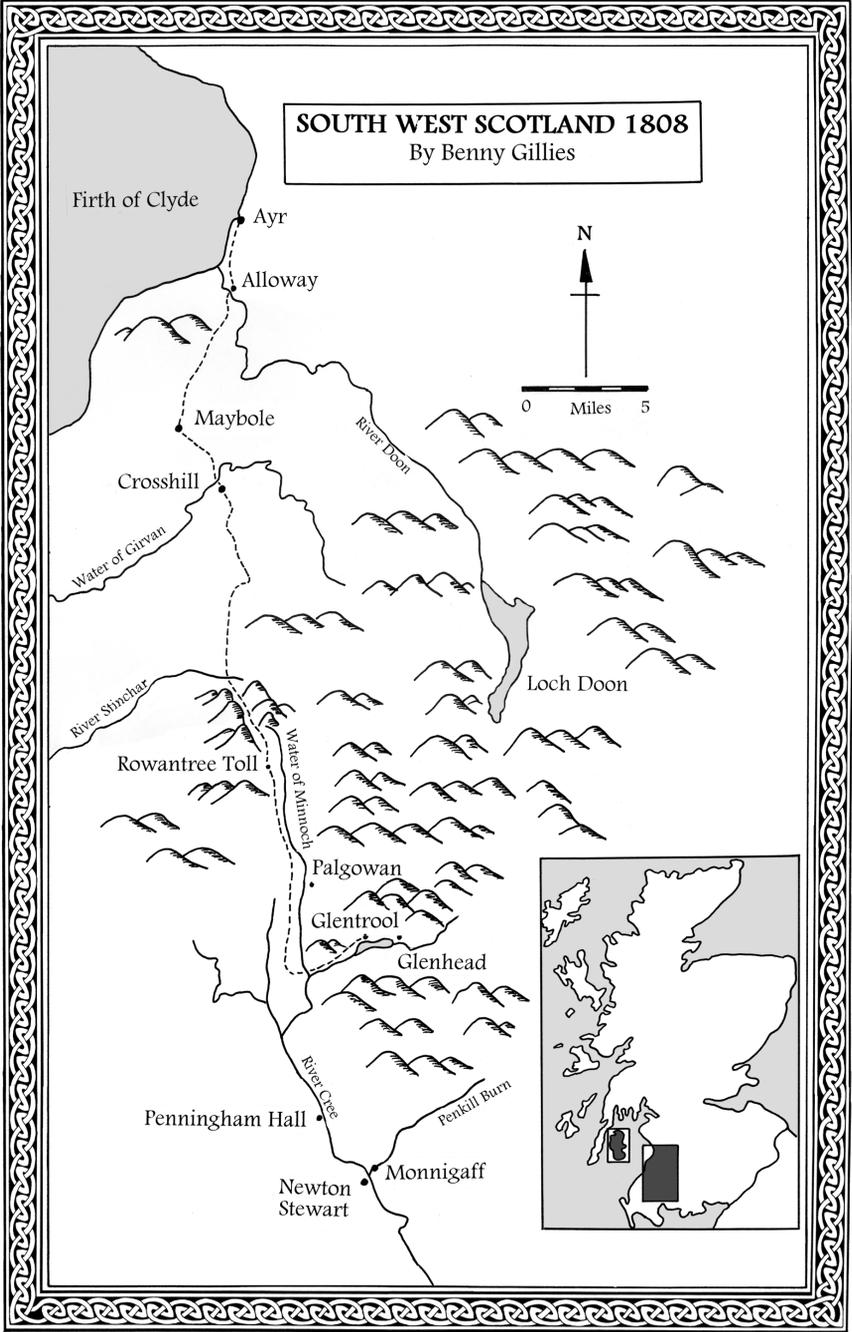
*Thank you, dear sister,
for taking this journey with me
again and again.*

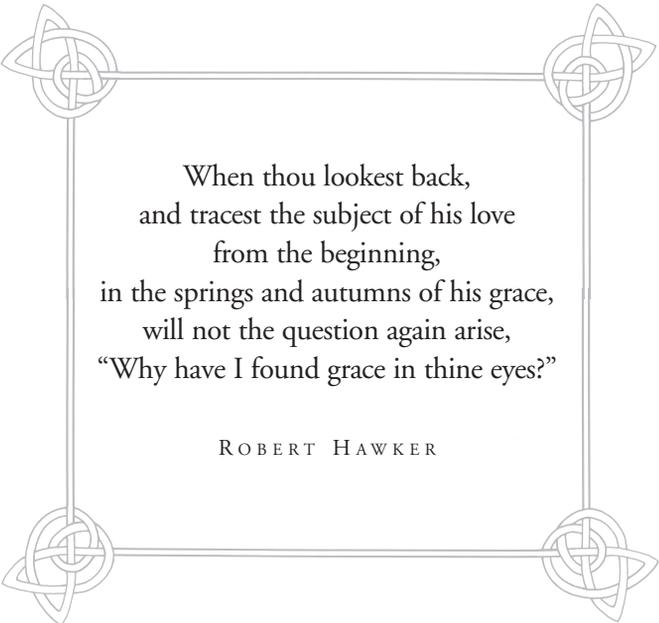
ISLE of ARRAN 1808
By Benny Gillies



SOUTH WEST SCOTLAND 1808

By Benny Gillies





When thou lookest back,
and tracest the subject of his love
from the beginning,
in the springs and autumns of his grace,
will not the question again arise,
“Why have I found grace in thine eyes?”

ROBERT HAWKER

One

No doubt they rose up early to observe
The rite of May.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Glen of Loch Trool
Spring 1808

Davina McKie dropped to her knees on the grassy hillock, letting her shawl slip past her shoulders despite the sharp chill in the air. The silent glen stood draped in a pearl gray mist, the rugged peaks of Mulldonach mere shadows edged in copper, hinting at dawn.

A smile stole across her face. Her brothers were nowhere to be seen.

Davina swept her fingers over the cool, wet grass, then lightly patted her cheeks and brow, touching her nose for good measure. If the May dew banished her freckles, as the *auld* wives promised, she would gladly wash her face out of doors every morning of the month. Never mind that the ruddy spots matched her bright mane of hair; *ferntickles* were better suited to a child's complexion. After seventeen years, Davina was quite ready to be done with them.

She sat up and rearranged her drooping crown of daisies, meant to safeguard her from brownies, *bogles*, and other uncanny creatures that roamed the land on Beltane, then started to her feet when a familiar voice rose from the fog.

"On May Day, in a fairy ring!" Her brother Will. There was no mistaking his baritone. His twin, Sandy—only their mother called him Alexander—would not be far behind.

Ah well. Davina spun round to greet them.

Two shaggy heads, black as midnight, emerged from the mist. A year younger than she, the twins were in every way identical, from their

dark brown eyes to their broad chests and muscular backs. “Like stags,” their mother had once said, gently teasing them not to be seen on the moors during hunting season.

As the lads drew near, they finished the May Day rhyme. “We’ve seen them round Saint Anthon’s spring.”

Davina recognized the poet.

“Robert Ferguson,” Will answered for her as if he’d read the name in her eyes. He tugged at her unbound hair, which spilled down her back, the scarlet ends brushing her waist. “Sandy, I told you we’d spot a fairy on the *braes* this morning. See how her ears come to a point?”

The McKie brothers never tired of comparing her to the wee folk since the crown of her head did not reach their shoulders, and her hands and feet were no bigger than a young girl’s. She snatched her hair from Will’s grasp, only to find his twin plucking at her skirts.

Sandy’s eyes gleamed with mischief as he appraised her. “A light green gown, fair skin, and a wreath of flowers. She only lacks wings.”

Will winked at her. “You’ve not looked hard enough, Brother.”

She fluttered her eyelet shawl behind her, making them both laugh.

“I see by her wet cheek our fairy has been bathing in the dew.” Sandy gently tweaked her nose. “Perhaps she thinks she’s not bonny enough.”

Davina knew he was teasing but turned on her heel nonetheless and flounced down the hill toward home, taking care not to lose her footing on the slippery grass and ruin her stageworthy exit. When her brothers called after her, she pretended not to hear them.

“*Och!*” Will shouted her name, the sharpness of his voice muted by the moist air. “Sandy meant no offense. You know how daft he is when it comes to the lasses.”

She heard a soft groan as fist connected with flesh, then Sandy’s voice, slightly winded. “He speaks the truth, Davina. You’ve no need of the May dew when you’re already the fairest maid in Galloway.”

An exaggerated claim. South West Scotland boasted dozens of young women far prettier than she. Still, she’d made her brothers grovel long enough. Davina slowed her steps, letting the lads catch up.

“There now.” Will wrapped her right hand round the crook of his

elbow, and Sandy the same on her left. “Let us cease any talk of your beauty. As it is, no gentleman in Monnigaff parish is worthy of you.”

She could not clap her hands—her usual means of expressing amusement—so Davina simply shook her head at Will’s foolishness as they continued downhill together. Perhaps that night when she took to the heath by the light of a gibbous moon, she’d evade her brothers altogether. The ritual required absolute silence—something she managed easily and the twins did not manage at all.

“We’ve a secret,” Will confessed as the threesome reached level ground. “That’s why we came looking for you.” He led them away from the rushing waters of Buchan Burn and headed west toward the McKie mansion. “Father intends to make an announcement after breakfast. As usual, he’s told us nothing.”

“Aye.” Sandy grimaced. “’Twill be a revelation to us all.”

Davina searched each face in turn. Was it glad tidings or ill? She touched her lips, then her heart, knowing they would grasp her meaning: *Can you not tell me more? I will keep your secret.*

Will shook his head, stamping the grass a bit harder. “That’s all we know, lass. Father demanded we arrive promptly at table. He wasn’t smiling when he said it.”

Bad news, then.

Her earlier joy began to dissipate, like the morning mist giving way to the sun. The trio walked on in silence broken only by the throaty cry of a raven gliding above the surface of Loch Trool. When the thick stand of pines along the loch made continuing arm in arm impossible, Davina followed behind Will, with Sandy close on her heels, her mind turning over the possibilities.

Was a wedding in the offing? The twins were only sixteen, far too young for marriage. Davina’s steps slowed. Surely her father did not have a suitor in mind for her? Not likely, or her mother would have mentioned something. Was Ian to marry, then? Quite as *braw* as their handsome father, her brother would make a fine catch for any lass. Nineteen years of age come October, he was man enough to take a wife.

Ian was in every way her older brother. Responsible. Trustworthy. Intelligent. The twins used other words: Predictable. Unimaginative.

Dull. Davina suspected that envy fueled such sentiments: Ian would inherit all of Glentool. Still, it was Will and Sandy who'd come looking for her on the hills, speculating about an announcement. Might their father not have some favorable word to share with his younger sons? If so, she would mark this day as a rare and welcome occasion.

As they neared Glentool, Davina lifted her gaze to its square central tower and the round turret nestled in the heart of its L-shaped design. Built of rough granite from the glen, the house was rugged and imposing, like the Fell of Eschoncan that stood behind it; immovable and unshakable, like the faith of the great-grandfather who had built it.

After crossing the threshold, they started down the long entrance hall, the twins' boot heels loud against the hardwood floor. Davina paused at the mirror to smooth the muslin tucker round her neckline and pluck the flowers from her hair, now a tangled mess after her early morning ramble on the hills.

Drawing a steadying breath, she turned away from her reflection and walked into the dark-beamed dining room, where she was greeted by portraits of McKies from generations past. A single window did little to brighten the dim interior. The rest of the family was already seated, with Father at the head of the long table, Ian to his left and Mother on his right. Though Ian simply said, "Good morning," she saw the wariness in his gaze, heard his unspoken warning. *Something is amiss*. A slight furrow carved her father's brow. More cause for concern.

"I was about to send Rab off to find you." Their mother's tone was kind, without censure. "You see, my husband?" She touched his sleeve. "Your sons have joined you at table, just as you requested."

"So they have." Jamie rested his hand on hers, a slight smile softening his features.

Most marriages among the gentry were forged in silver, with little thought for romance; not so Davina's parents'. She thought they made a handsome couple: Leana, with her porcelain skin, silvery blond hair, and wide, blue gray eyes; and Jamie, his brown hair still thick but shot through with silver, his dark brows arched over moss green eyes that missed nothing. Her mother had quietly celebrated her fortieth year in March and her father the same a few years earlier.

“Dearest?” Leana’s voice stirred Davina from her reverie. So did the sketchbook that she slid toward her. “I found this in your room and thought you might have need of it.”

Davina opened the clothbound volume to a blank page, then fingered the attached charcoal pencil, carved to a fine point by her father’s horn-handled knife. Whenever facial expressions or hand signals would not suffice to share her thoughts with others, she scribbled them along the margins of her sketches. Just now she felt a strong urge to draw something, to keep hand and mind occupied while the others ate, for she had little appetite.

Two servants entered from the kitchen, steaming dishes in hand. Rashers of bacon and a fragrant pot of cooked oats were added to the sideboard, joining a cold platter of sliced mutton and boiled hens’ eggs. The twins stood to fill their plates, more subdued than Davina had seen them in many a morning.

She swallowed a bit of dry oatcake, then quietly sipped her tea, searching her mother’s face for some clue of what the morning might hold. Was that a slight tremor in Leana’s chin? a hint of moisture in her eyes?

All at once her father thrust aside his half-eaten plate of food and dabbed his mouth, signaling his intentions. “I have important news that cannot wait any longer.”

Davina’s breath caught. *Please, Father. Let it be good news.*

Her brothers turned to the head of the table, their expressions grim, as Davina found her sketchbook pencil. It seemed their questions were about to be answered.

Two

A mother's secret hope outlives them all.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

Leana McKie did not close her eyes or bow her head, yet still she prayed in the deepest recesses of her heart. *Help my sons understand. Let my daughter not be dismayed.*

Watching Davina grip her pencil more tightly, Leana longed to smooth back the wisps of red hair from the young woman's brow to comfort her. To prepare her. Fearing the gesture might alarm Davina further, Leana folded her hands in her lap and gave Jamie her full regard. Her husband was not insensitive; he would deliver the news with care.

Though he did not stand, Jamie's straight back and lifted chin commanded respect. He was suitably dressed in a burgundy coat and buff breeches, his shirt collar pointed above his cravat, his sleek hair tied at the nape of his neck. Charles, his new valet, had performed his duties well; the laird of Glentool looked the part.

Jamie drew a letter from his waistcoat with some ceremony. "'Tis a post from a certain university, responding to my recent inquiry." He scanned the creased paper as if looking for a particular passage. "Principal Baird writes, 'Your twin sons are duly equipped for academic pursuits. Convey young William and Alexander to Edinburgh posthaste.'"

He could not have shocked their children more if he'd slapped their faces.

The twins stared at him, mouths agape. "Edinburgh?" Sandy managed to say, his voice taut as a rope.

When no one else spoke, Ian said, "Well done, lads."

"Aye," Leana said softly. "Well done." Except this was not their doing; it was Jamie's.

He waved the letter like a flag, capturing their attention once more.

“The principal goes on to say, ‘The summer term commences on the tenth of May.’” Jamie laid the letter on the table, displaying the elegant script for all to see. “Come Tuesday next, Will and Sandy will be furthering their education in the capital.”

Will shifted in his seat. “You sound eager to have us gone, sir.” His even tone fooled no one; each word bore the weight of his anger. “I daresay we’ll hardly be missed.”

Oh, William. Leana looked away, undone by the pain in his eyes, in his voice, in his posture. The years of neglect had taken their toll. *Say something, Jamie.*

For a moment Will’s challenge hung in the air, unanswered.

“On the contrary, you’ll be greatly missed,” Jamie finally said, “especially by the women of the household.”

Leana touched her daughter’s hand, offering what encouragement she could. *I am here, dearest. And always shall be.* She watched Davina’s pencil scratch across the page of her sketchbook, her mouth pressed into a thin line and her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

Only Leana was close enough to read the words she’d written: *Must they go?*

“A fair question,” Leana murmured, grateful for any discussion that might relieve the tension in the room. “Your father can explain why the lads are obliged to attend university.” She nodded at Jamie, praying his answer might ease Davina’s sorrow and the twins’ as well. The lass adored her brothers and would not bid them farewell gladly.

“All four of you have been well tutored by Mr. McFadgen,” Jamie reminded Davina, his manner toward her markedly kinder. “Now ’tis time your younger brothers sought their fortunes. In civil law perhaps. Or in the church.”

Leana eyed the twins, with their unruly hair and untamed natures. William a barrister? Alexander a minister? Athletic as they were and prone to pugnacious behavior, they had little interest in legal or ecclesiastical matters. Military life held more appeal, though with British regiments battling Napoleon on the Continent, Leana had done her best to quash such aspirations.

Will turned to his sister, his features stony. "I'm sorry, Davina. We did not...expect this."

"We'll come home as often as we can," Sandy promised, though the doubt in his voice suggested otherwise. "Or perhaps you might visit us in Edinburgh."

"Your studies will keep you well occupied," Jamie said brusquely. "Do not extend invitations your sister cannot accept."

Davina quietly closed her book, the pencil tucked inside. Her heart was hidden from view as well, for she ducked her head and would not let them see her face.

The air felt charged, as if a storm were approaching. Something had to be done. "Gentlemen." Leana rose, prompting the men to their feet as well. "While you discuss your travel arrangements, Davina and I have plans of our own this morning."

Taking her cue, Davina stood and followed her into the hall.

Leana slowly closed the dining room door behind them, praying that whatever conversation followed would be redemptive. Jamie, anxious to have the matter out in the open, had been too abrupt. Will, as usual, had become sullen, defensive. As for their daughter, Davina's buoyant personality had been sorely tested with the unexpected news. Leana wished she might be in three places at once, smoothing all their ruffled feathers. Perhaps Ian would bring his calming influence to bear where she could not.

"Let us away, dearie." Leana clasped Davina's cool hand in hers and led her toward the stair, keeping her voice low. "Do not think ill of your father. He is acting in the twins' best interest, for their fine minds should be put to good use. Alas, that cannot happen here at Glentool, and so to Edinburgh they must go."

Davina lifted her head at last, her eyes still wet with tears.

Oh my child. Without a word Leana drew her daughter into her arms, tucking her head beneath her chin. Seventeen, aye, but so small, this one. "They will come home, Davina. And they will never forget you, these brothers of yours. I can promise you that."

In the quiet entrance hall she heard voices rumbling behind the dining room door. Not raised, but not cordial. She would spare Davina imagining the worst.

"'Tis May Day," Leana said softly, releasing her daughter from her embrace. "Whatever betides us, our neighbors will soon appear at our doorstep. And you've a fiddle that needs tuning, aye?" She started up the broad oak staircase, aiming her comments over her shoulder as Davina trailed after her. "Suppose we let Sarah dress your hair first, and then we'll see how Robert is managing in the garden."

The dark-haired lady's maid stood by Davina's dressing table, brush and comb at the ready. "I *ken* ye'll be wantin' *tae leuk* yer best *whan* ye play yer fiddle, miss."

Leana rested her hands on her daughter's slender shoulders and met her gaze in the glass. "Most ladies of your acquaintance wear their hair tightly gathered atop their heads. Might you prefer something else?"

Davina's expression brightened a little. She began weaving her long hair in a loose braid, then pointed to the dark green ribbons trailing beneath her bodice and to the pink gillyflowers in the china vase on her dresser. A thick braid plaited with flowers and ribbons was perfect for May Day, however unconventional the style. Parish folk had grown accustomed to Davina's eccentricities and had pronounced her "an original." When she brought Galloway's rural scenery to life with only charcoal lines on a page, her artistic nature was on full display. And when she tucked her fiddle beneath her chin and sent her bow flying across the strings, her surrogate voice rang out sweet and clear.

Someday a perceptive gentleman would not only see Davina, he would instinctively *hear* her, discerning her thoughts and identifying her deepest longings. Leana withdrew into the shadowy doorway, hiding her sadness. *Please, Lord, may that day not come too soon.* With the twins leaving home and Ian old enough to marry, Leana knew her mothering years were drawing to a close. No more drying their tears or polishing their manners. No more stories by the hearth or prayers by their bedsides.

Her *bairns* were grown now, her cradlesongs forgotten. "*Baloo, baloo, my wee, wee thing,*" Leana sang softly, leaning her head on the doorpost.

Tree

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away.

ISAAC WATTS

You might have told us privately, Father.”
“Nae, you might have told us sooner.”

Jamie McKie deliberately folded his hands and rested them on the dining table. “I received the letter from Principal Baird only *yestermorn*. Your mother deserved to know first.” He fixed his gaze on Will and Sandy, lest they doubt his sincerity. “I chose to tell the four of you together so that Ian and Davina would not feel excluded.”

Will shot back, “But *our* lives are the ones being disrupted, not theirs.”

“That is not true,” Jamie countered. “What happens to one member of this family affects us all.”

After a moment’s silence, Ian cleared his throat. “Would you prefer that I leave, Father?”

“I would prefer that you stay.” Jamie rose, holding up his hand lest they consider pushing back their chairs as well. “Lads, I understand your frustration—”

“Nae, you do *not*!” Even while seated, Will stood up to him. “Sandy and I are being thrust out the door without any say in the matter.”

“’Tis a fact, Father.” Sandy, though less vocal, was no less antagonistic. “We chose neither the time nor the place—”

“They were not yours to choose.” Jamie fought to keep his voice low, glancing toward the kitchen door. He would not fill his servants’ ears with family gossip. “Since Walter McFadgen assured me you were ready, it seemed imprudent to delay your studies. No finer university exists in Scotland.” He softened his tone by intent. “Even you must admit that.”

“But to have no choice,” Will protested. “You cannot imagine what it is like to be evicted from your own home.”

I ken very well. Jamie looked down, lest his sons see the truth in his eyes. “’Tis an accident of birth when an heir is born. Ian did not elect to be first, any more than you and Sandy chose to be second and third.” He lifted his head, meeting their misery head-on. “I did what I believed to be best for everyone. As laird of Glentrool, I have the right to make decisions for my children, such as where the two of you will be educated and whom Davina will marry.”

“Davina?” Will’s eyes narrowed. “Have you plans for our sister as well?”

“Nae, not at present.” He’d seen the look on Davina’s face when Leana had ushered her from the room. “’Tis my younger sons who concern me just now. I’ve arranged lodging in Edinburgh with Professor Russell and will escort you there personally. We leave at noon on Thursday.”

“Hech!” Will stood, throwing his napkin on the table. “A blithe journey we’ll have, the three of us.”

“And a fine May Day in the meantime,” Sandy fumed.

When the two stamped out of the room, Jamie did not demand an apology or insist they remain until dismissed. He’d challenged them enough. Later, when their tempers had cooled, he would mend whatever fences he could.

Still seated, Ian looked at him with a steady gaze, free of reproach. “I am sorry, Father. My brothers have not made this easy for you.”

“Nor should they.” Jamie began to pace in front of the hearth. “Ian, you cannot imagine how difficult life is for a second son. I asked you to stay so you might see for yourself what a vexing predicament your brothers face. Someday, Lord willing, you will have sons of your own.” He stopped pacing long enough to catch Ian’s eye. “And when the time comes, you will remember this hour.”

“I’ll not likely forget it, sir.” Ian stood and offered a slight bow. “If I may...”

“By all means.” Jamie bowed as well, sending the lad to his duties. Ian spent each morning at his desk, examining his ledgers and learning

the intricacies of estate management. The Almighty had selected a fine heir in Ian McKie. "Aye, and left the others for me to manage," Jamie grumbled aloud. He had not handled things well. Though his gentle wife would never tell him so, he knew it to be true.

He quit the dining room, bound for the library. If Ian could bury himself in columns of numbers, he would do the same. Anything to clear his mind of a heartbroken daughter and angry sons. The muffled sounds of servants at work echoed through the cavernous house as he stepped into the entrance hall.

Leana's voice floated down the stair. "Aye, you look lovely, Davina. I'll watch for you and your fiddle in the garden at noon."

This was one fence he intended to repair immediately. Jamie waited as his wife descended the stair, his uplifted gaze searching hers.

"Where are the twins?" she asked softly.

He inclined his head toward the front door. "Off on their morning ride, I imagine. Pounding their anger into the bridle path round the loch." When she reached the last step, Jamie pulled her aside. "And what of your mood, Mrs. McKie?" He glowered at her in jest. "Are ye *fash wi'* me for sendin' yer *green* sons off tae Embrough?" His quaint use of Scots was meant to appease her. Few among the gentry still spoke the language, so thoroughly had King George's English plowed its way north.

"I am not unhappy with you, Jamie," she confessed, "though you might have been more genial toward the twins."

"Forgive me, my love." Jamie lightly kissed her cheek. "However poorly executed, my intentions were sound. I grew up as a second son in this house. I'll not see Will and Sandy coddled—"

"As your mother coddled you?" Leana did not say it unkindly.

"Just so," he agreed. "Her indulgence earned me a blessing from my father but a curse from my brother, and well deserved. 'Tis only by God's grace that Evan does not hate me still." Jamie sighed heavily. "I'll not send my sons into the world as I was sent: a *heidie* young man, ill prepared and irresponsible."

Leana laced her fingers through his. "As it happens, I fell in love with that young man and gladly gave him three sons and a fine daughter."

"They're fortunate indeed to have you for their mother." Jamie

lifted her hand and kissed the back of it, her skin soft against his mouth and fragrant with soap. “I know this is distressing for you, Leana. How could it not be?” He glanced toward the second floor. “And hard for Davina as well. Is she prepared to live without the twins’ company? For they’ll not return soon.”

“Will they not come home at Lammas?” A faint tightness crept into her voice.

“For a fortnight in early August, but no longer. Once they’re settled in Edinburgh, visits to Glentroot will be rare. And when Ian marries—”

“Marries?” She did not hide her surprise. “Have you some lass in mind?”

“Nae, but Ian might.” Jamie glanced toward the closed library door, ten steps away. “The last few Sabbaths he’s tarried in the kirkyard with Margaret McMillan.”

He’d noticed the two quietly conversing between services, Ian’s dark head bent over Margaret’s fair one. The McMillans of Glenhead were the McKies’ nearest neighbors, and John McMillan one of his oldest friends. Though not people of great fortune, the family had earned the respect of the parish for their honest speech and good hearts. “A man’s greatest wealth is contentment with little,” Jamie often said of his friend.

“Will you approve the match?” Leana asked.

Jamie studied the library door, thinking of the young man within. “Our households share the same history, the same faith. And Margaret has a lively manner.”

Leana smiled a little. “I remember her splashing in Buchan Burn last summer, her skirts kilted well above her ankles. Miss McMillan might be a good foil for your serious-minded heir.”

He nodded, convincing himself. “Margaret has a keen mind, which bodes well for their future together. However comely a woman, ’tis her intellect that pleases a husband most.”

“Truly?” Leana smoothed a loose strand of his hair into place, trailing her fingers across his brow. “My mind gives you pleasure, then?”

Jamie turned and drew her closer. “Aye, it does, dear wife.”

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