



Whence Came a Prince

A NOVEL BY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

LIZ CURTIS HIGGS



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WATERBROOK
P R E S S

*To the many faithful readers
who embraced both Thorn and Rose...
Your Prince has come.*



WHENCE CAME A PRINCE
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All Scripture quotations are taken from the *King James Version* of the Bible.

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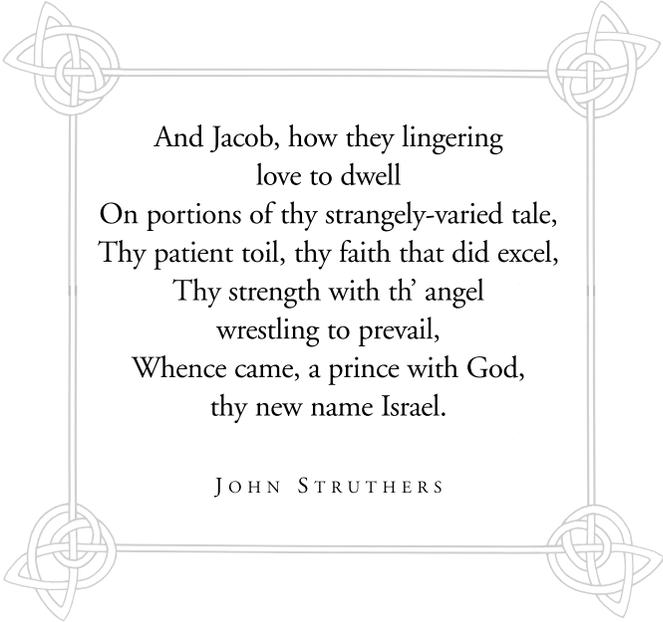
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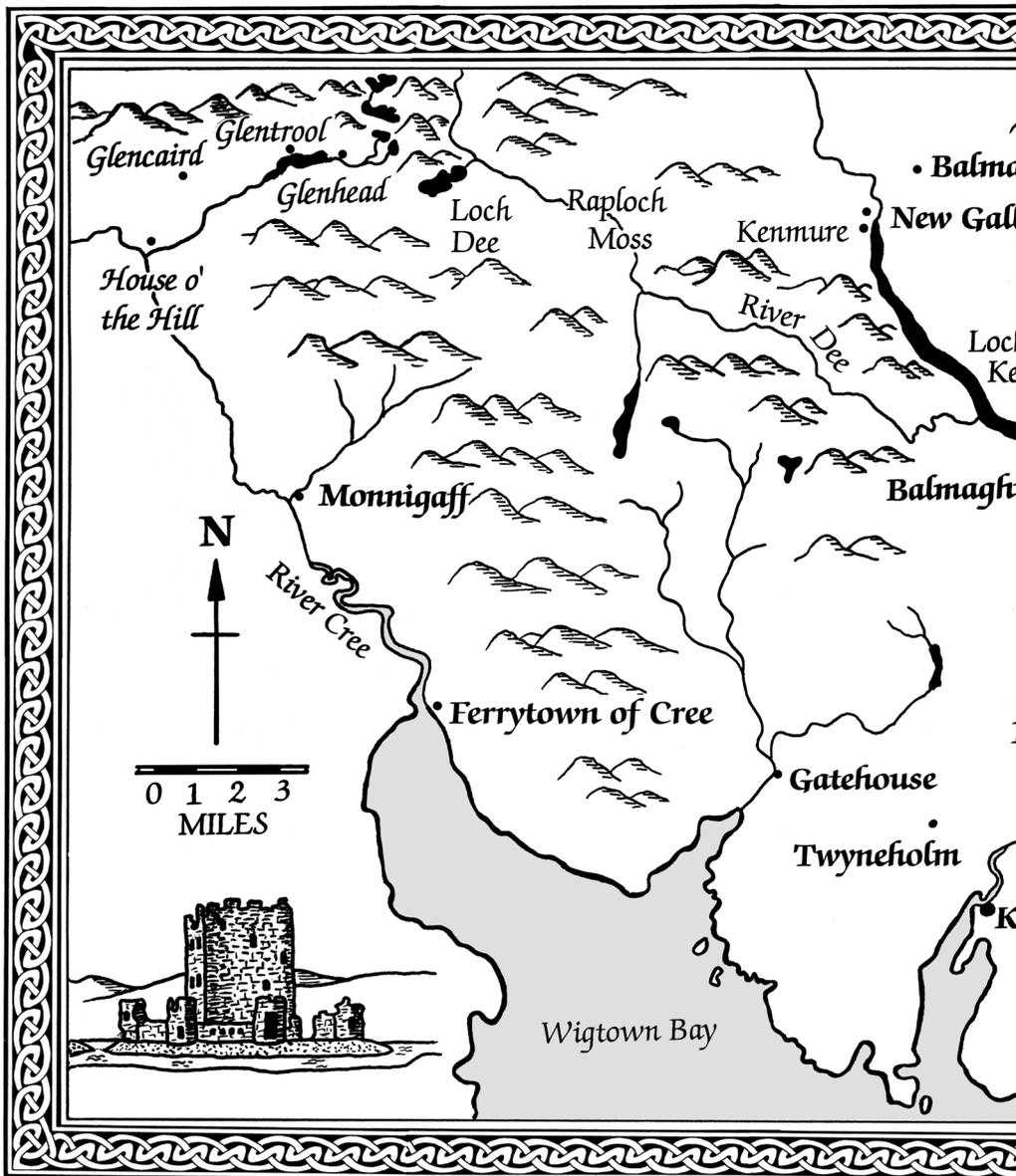
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And Jacob, how they lingering
love to dwell
On portions of thy strangely-varied tale,
Thy patient toil, thy faith that did excel,
Thy strength with th' angel
wrestling to prevail,
Whence came, a prince with God,
thy new name Israel.

JOHN STRUTHERS



Glencaird

Glentrool

Glenhead

Loch
Dee

Raploch
Moss

Kenmure

• Balma
New Gall

House o'
the Hill

River
Dee

Loch
Ke

• Monnigaff

Balmagfu

N

River
Cree

• Ferrytown of Cree

Gatehouse

0 1 2 3
MILES

Twyneholm

Wigtown Bay





GALLOWAY, Scotland
1790
by Benny Gillies

Balmaclellan
New Galloway

River Nith
Dumfries

Loch Ken

Urr Water

Urrmaghie

Milltown
Lochend
Auchengray
Lowtis Hill

Haugh of Urr

Threave

Newabbey

Carlinwark Loch

Dalbeaty

Criffell

Kirkbean

Keltonfill

Kirkcudbright

Dundrennan

Solway Firth



One

The heart that is soonest awake to the flowers
Is always the first to be touch'd by the thorns.

THOMAS MOORE

Burnside Cottage
Whitsuntide 1790

I will never leave you.

I Leana McBride sat up in bed, disoriented, grasping at the threads of her dream. She'd been sitting under the yew tree on the edge of Auchengray's garden, cradling her infant son to her breast, brushing her fingers through his silky hair, singing softly as he nursed.

Baloo, baloo, my wee, wee thing.

Ian's warm scent seemed to permeate the air of her aunt's tiny cottage in Twyneholm. The recalled softness of his cheek felt more real than the linen nightgown beneath her fingertips, the memory of his small, hungry mouth more tangible than the rough sheets against her bare skin.

She gripped the edges of the bed as grief pierced her heart anew. Aunt Meg had insisted the pain would ease with time. Leana glanced over her shoulder at the older woman, still fast asleep. Her aunt meant well, but two months had not diminished the potent memories of her son that haunted her dreams and clouded her thoughts.

By the hour she'd contemplated going home to Auchengray. Only two dozen miles, yet "a world away," as Aunt Meg had once said. Leana had pictured herself running up the stair to the nursery, gathering Ian in her arms, and holding him for days on end. She would have done it. She *would* have. If somehow she could have seen Ian yet not seen Jamie.

Oh, my dear Jamie.

Aye, she missed him as well, desperately so. In a different way, yet

the same. *Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh.* The smooth planes of his face, the dark slash of his brows, his generous mouth and strong chin rose before her like a portrait painted by a master artist. She had loved Jamie McKie from the first moment he walked across Auchengray's lawn one bright October afternoon. Though it was more than a year before he returned that love, when he did, Jamie had given her his whole heart.

But now that heart belonged to her sister. To Rose.

Leana turned her head on the pillow, imagining Jamie beside her. Did he love her still, as she loved him? Did he think of her at all? Did he suffer as she did? She was ashamed of her thoughts, but they would not be silenced.

This much she knew: No letter had arrived begging her to return. No carriage or mount had come clattering up to Burnside's door, prepared to carry her home. She had left Auchengray of her own free will on the day of Rose's wedding, intending to stay at Aunt Meg's long enough to mend her shattered heart. And long enough for Rose to mend Jamie's, as much as it grieved Leana to think of it.

It was nearly June. With the spring lambing ended at Auchengray, surely they'd left for Jamie's ancestral home in the glen of Loch Trool, taking her precious Ian with them. "We will wipe the dust of Auchengray off our feet come May," Jamie had promised her in February. Instead, it was Rose who'd traveled to Glentool.

Would her sister write once they settled in? Describe how Ian was growing? Declare he looked more like his father every day? Though such news might wound her, Leana preferred it to no word at all. Not a single post bearing Rose's *kenspeckle* script had arrived at Burnside Cottage. Nor was there one from her father. But thoughtful Neda Hastings, Auchengray's housekeeper, had sent a long letter last month, brimming with details of Ian's progress.

There was no mention of Jamie. The man who was once her husband. The man who'd blessed her womb with Ian. The man now married to her sister.

"Be thou my strong rock," Leana whispered into the darkness. Drawing the Almighty's comforting presence round her like a thick plaid, she rose from the *hurlie* bed. Meg had trundled it out from

beneath her own bed the March night her niece had arrived. Low to the floor and narrow, it was much like the one Leana had slept in at home in the nursery. With Ian.

Her gaze fell on the small nightgown draped over her sewing bag. She'd pieced it together from remnants of soft cotton, intending to embroider the sleeves and hem with purple thistles. By the time she completed it, Ian would be nine months old and in need of a new sleeping gown. If she could not see him, she could at least sew for him. Holding the fabric in her hands brought him closer to her. Imagining her stitches brushing against his tender skin gave her a small measure of comfort.

While her aunt snored soundly, Leana bathed her hands and face in a warm bowl by the hearth. She slipped on her plain green gown, then swung a kettle over the coal grate to boil water for their tea, ever aware that her days in Twyneholm were numbered. Her aunt could ill afford a houseguest much longer. And Leana missed home.

She lit one of the beeswax candles made from Meg's own hives, then collected the tools for her baking—a wooden *spurtle* for stirring, a notched rolling pin, and a heart-shaped iron spade to move the oatcakes about—recalling the many times she and Neda had worked side by side in Auchengray's spacious kitchen.

A handful of meal, a pinch of soda, a dash of salt, a spoonful of goose fat from last night's supper, and the first oatcake took shape beneath her hands. She sprinkled the board with meal as she went, added hot water sparingly, and kneaded the small lump of dough with her knuckles. Neda's voice echoed in her head. *Spread it oot evenly. Keep yer hands movin'.* Leana rolled the dough as thin as she could and pinched the edges with her fingers before the first oatcake went onto the *girdle* over the fire, and the process started all over again.

A faint light spread across the room as she worked. Soon a cock's crow from a neighboring farm announced the break of day.

"I've ne'er seen a finer pair of hands at a baking board."

She looked up to find Margaret Halliday beaming at her from across the room, a threadbare wrapper tied round her waist. Leana managed a wan smile in return. "Good morning, Auntie."

“You’ll spoil me yet, lass. Preparing my breakfast for me. Weeding my kitchen garden. Filling my coal pail.”

“’Tis the least I can do.” Leana kept an eye on the oatcakes. When the edges curled up, they were done. “My hands are full of meal, or I’d pour your tea.”

“*Och*. I’ll see to that.”

The women moved round to accommodate each other in the small cooking space and soon were seated at table, their breakfast on a crockery plate. Leana nibbled a piece of oatcake but put it down half-eaten, her appetite vanished.

Aunt Meg reached across the table and turned Leana’s chin toward the window, eying her. “You’ve grown thinner since you came. This morn in particular, you’ve a *dwiny* look about you.”

“My stomach does feel a bit queasy.” Leana swallowed the disagreeable taste in her mouth, then pressed a hand to her forehead. “But my skin is cool.”

“We’ve not had an epidemic in the parish for nigh to thirty years. Ague, it was. Terrible fevers and chills.” Aunt Meg peered at her more closely. “Did my roasted goose not sit well on your stomach? I thought it a pleasant change from mutton and fish.”

“I ate too much of it, I fear. I’ll go for a walk shortly, which should help.” She stared down at her teacup as if the dark liquid contained the strength she needed to say what must be said. “Auntie, it’s time I went home to Auchengray.”

“Oh, my dear niece.” The disappointment in Meg’s voice was obvious.

Leana looked up and touched her aunt’s wrinkled cheek. “I’ve stayed far too long already. Nearly two months.”

Meg’s eyes watered. “When you came to my door that rainy Sabbath eve, I was happy to make room for you. And I’d gladly share Burnside Cottage with you for all of my days, if you wouldn’t mind an *auld* woman’s company.”

“You are far from old, and I cherish your company.” Leana tenderly brushed away Meg’s tears. “But you cannot afford to feed and clothe me.

And I have duties to attend to at home. With Rose gone, Auchengray has no mistress. The gardens will suffer, and the wool won't be spun." She squeezed Meg's bony hands. "Do forgive me, dearie. You knew this time would come."

"Aye, though I hoped it might not." Her aunt regarded her at length, compassion shining in her blue gray eyes. "Will you write Willie and ask him to bring the chaise?"

"Nae," Leana said firmly. She could not involve Willie, Auchengray's *orraman*, without her father's permission. Not again. "This must be my own doing. My own silver. A hired chaise."

Her aunt's mouth fell open. "But you have no silver."

"A predicament I shall remedy shortly." Leana tried to sound confident, though she had yet to think of a means of securing such a sum. "Mr. Crosbie at the tollgate said a chaise and driver would cost me fifteen shillings." A fortune for a woman with mere pennies in her purse.

Meg propped her chin on her hand. "Would that I had the silver to give you."

"You've done more than enough, Auntie. Suppose I go for that walk and see if some clever notion doesn't present itself." Leana stood, feeling lightheaded for a moment, then slipped on her cloak and prayed the brisk morning air would calm her stomach. One of her aunt's two colliers bounded through the doorway ahead of her and shook itself awake from ears to tail, then turned round, waiting for her to follow.

Leana pulled Burnside's red wooden door closed, then absently scratched the dog's silky head. Twyneholm was not a proper village, merely a cluster of two-room cottages—some with thatched roofs, like Meg's, others with slate—built along the military road. Reverend Scott, the parish minister, insisted that a great and ancient battle, fought nigh to the kirk, had left a king slain and his vanquished men staggering home in a winding direction—hence the name *tae wyne hame*. Aunt Meg scoffed at his romantic notion. "'Tis a low patch of land, or holm, that lies 'tween the Tarff Water and the Corraford Burn."

Leana only knew that Twyneholm had served her well. A quiet refuge for a heart torn in two. In a handful of days, when the month of

June arrived, she would look to the north, to Auchengray, and pray for the means—and the strength—to return home.

She no longer had a child to mother or a husband to love. But she did have faith in the One who had not forsaken her. *I will never leave you.* Words the Almighty had spoken to Jamie in a dream. Words she had whispered to Jamie when their future was certain. Words Leana still held close to her heart.

TWO

Of all the spirits abroad at this hour in the world,
insincerity is the most dangerous.

JAMES ANTHONY FROUDE

Patience, lass.” Jamie McKie gazed into his young wife’s face, her dark eyes alight with expectation. In his hands he held a post from his mother, delivered to Newabbey village, then carried to Auchengray’s door. His future with Rose hinged on the letter’s contents.

Late afternoon sunlight cast a warm glow across their bedroom. Rose stood on tiptoe, her hands clasped before her, as if she were prepared to fly down the stair. “Now that word from Glentrool has finally come, we are free to make our announcement, aye?” She pressed her palms below her waist, spreading her fingers across her blue linen gown. “I fear if we don’t inform the household, our *bairn* will soon do so for us.”

Jamie acknowledged her words with a slight nod. Though Rose’s figure had yet to change, there were more subtle indicators. An ever-present blush on her soft cheek. An untouched cup of porridge each morning. A nap each afternoon. He knew the signs well. Last summer he’d watched her sister blossom with child: Leana, the woman he’d loved too late. This summer it was Rose’s turn to bloom: Rose, the woman he’d married too soon.

The twittering song of a linnet distracted Jamie for a moment, drawing his gaze to the open bedroom window. Summer was nigh upon them, and still they’d not departed for Glentrool as he’d planned. Every delay only sharpened his desire to return home and claim his inheritance. No matter what news the post might bring, their future lay to the west.

“Please, Jamie.” Rose captured his attention once more. “Open the letter, for I cannot bear another minute.”

Jamie unfolded his mother’s post, the creamy paper stiff beneath his

thumbs, and put aside the stack of guinea notes she'd enclosed. Funds for their journey, no doubt. Her elaborate handwriting and the word *Glentroot* inked across the top of the page stirred his memories of home. The distant hills and glens would be at their greenest, a lush pasture for his father's flocks. "Haste ye back," Alec McKie would say. Surely the time had come.

Rose hovered beside him, a hint of meadowsweet on her breath. "Written a week ago, I see. Read it to me, Jamie," she asked, and so he obliged her.

To James Lachlan McKie
Monday, 17 May 1790

My dearest son,

I pray this letter finds you enjoying good health and fair weather. Though our ewes did not all bear twins, as yours did, we had a fine lambing season. Henry Stewart is eager to see what you will do with our flocks for the autumn breeding.

Jamie's chest swelled at the thought of a seasoned shepherd like Stew welcoming his help come October. He read on, certain good news would follow.

I know you have waited patiently for your father's invitation to return home. When we sent you east to Auchengray to seek a wife two autumns ago, neither of us imagined so lengthy a visit. Now we must ask that you tarry at Auchengray a bit longer...

Rose groaned even before he'd finished the words. "Whatever is the matter this time? Will Evan ne'er make his way to Wigtownshire?"

Jamie shook his head, too frustrated to speak. Throughout the winter months his mother's letters had assured him that Evan, his hot-headed twin brother, would move south come spring, paving the way for a safe return. Now another delay loomed before them. As usual his mother offered little explanation.

“Wait until Lammas.” He jabbed at the words as if to banish them from sight. Lammas, a Quarter Day, fell on the first of August. “Another *two months* hence!” He strode toward the window, tossing the letter onto the bedside table. How dare the woman ask him to wait any longer?

Rowena McKie had once dared to ask a great deal more. *Just do what I say, Jamie.* At his mother’s bidding, he’d done an unspeakably foul deed, then had run for his life. Her letter was curiously silent on that subject. Had his father not truly forgiven him? Or was Evan sharpening his dirk, still threatening revenge?

Rose trailed after him, her skirts whispering across the wooden floor. “Can naught be done to change her mind?”

Jamie stared at the farm steading below, his eyes unfocused and his temper barely in check. “You do not *ken* my mother.”

“Not as you do.” She touched his coat sleeve. “But I know my father, and so do you. You must not let him take advantage of this delay, Jamie, for given half a chance he will.”

“Nae!” He ground out the word like oats on a provender stone. “Lachlan McBride will ne’er *swick* me again.” After twenty long months beneath his uncle’s roof, Jamie had learned to hold his tongue and hide his coin purse when Lachlan was present. “If I must live at Auchengray through the summer, I’ll labor under my own terms, not his.”

Rose’s hand on his sleeve tightened. “What terms have you in mind?”

“Suppose I tell your father that waiting until Lammas is *my* idea.” Already Jamie liked the sound of it. Not his mother’s plan, but his. “By the first of August the lambs will be sold and my duties here ended. Naught will remain but to claim my share of the earnings.” He turned abruptly, nearly knocking her off balance. “’Tis better to wait, or we risk losing everything. Will you trust me in this, Rose?”

She looked up at him, a half smile decorating her bonny face, a twinkle in her eye. “The first of August will do nicely.” Since he’d taken Rose to wife, Jamie had cataloged her many expressions; this one bore the mark of mischief. She wanted to outwit Lachlan McBride almost as badly as he did.

Rose swept her thick braid over her shoulder, then brushed his cheek with a kiss. “We shall celebrate my seventeenth year and quit Auchengray on the same day.” Sliding her hand inside the crook of his elbow, she tugged him toward the door. “As to our glad tidings, I suggest you tell Father at once. You know how he loathes *saicrets*.”

“Indeed he does.” Jamie tucked the guineas from Glentroot in a drawer, then escorted his wife into the upper corridor. “Unless the secrets are his.”

The aroma of meat roasting on the kitchen hearth wafted up the stone stairwell, calling them to table as clearly as the laird’s clanging brass bell. When they entered the dining room, Lachlan greeted them with a curt nod, fingers drumming as he awaited the midday meal. His dark suit of clothes marked him as no ordinary farmer but a bonnet laird, who held the deed to the land he worked and straddled the great chasm between highborn society and the peasantry. Lachlan cared nothing for either class; he resented the rich and ignored the poor, claiming neither understood the value of hard-earned silver.

Jamie and Rose were the only ones welcomed to the low-beamed dining room at mealtime, where the final course was always a fancy pudding, at Lachlan’s insistence. The household servants would take their dinner later—without pudding—at a well-scrubbed pine table in the kitchen, while the farmworkers and shepherds ate their meager rations out of doors.

“Uncle Lachlan.” Jamie made an effort to keep his tone pleasant. “Isn’t the weather fine?”

They spoke of trifling matters while Neda directed her staff in serving the meal. “Gentlemen,” the housekeeper said with a broad smile that belied her years, “ye’ll fancy this plump hen, I’ll wager.” A stuffed pullet was presented to the laird for his approval, then quickly sliced and served. Jamie ate prodigious quantities, gathering strength for the confrontation to follow. Rose poked at her food; little traveled from fork to mouth. When the citron pudding appeared, stained pale green with spinach juice, Rose blanched and made a hasty exit.

“*Whatsomever* has happened to my daughter’s appetite?” Lachlan plunged a spoon into his pudding. His ebony hair, pulled into a taut

knot, was streaked with silver—more each year, Jamie thought. Lachlan’s piercing gaze met his. “Is your wife ill?”

“Nae, not ill.” Jamie pushed aside his dish without tasting it. “Perhaps you’ve already *jaloused* the nature of her discomfort.”

Lachlan lowered his spoon, even as his brows lifted. “Is she...with child?”

“Aye.” Jamie watched the man attempt to mask his elation. “Rose tells me ’twill be January before the babe arrives, though one can never be certain. The Lord alone kens the hour.”

“Indeed he does.” Lachlan folded his hands over his stomach. “Are you thinking this child of yours should be born at Glentrool?”

Jamie seized the opportunity to present his case. “’Tis high time I headed for home.” His heart quickening, he pressed further. “And once the lambs are sold, ’tis time you paid me my wages, Uncle. My growing family must be provided for. Even you cannot deny the work I’ve done for you.”

“Impatience doesn’t become you, Jamie.” His uncle wagged a finger at him, as though reprimanding a child. “The laird of Glentrool may be auld, but Alec McKie has yet to lay *doon* in his grave.”

Jamie winced at the image. Please God, many years would pass before he saw a headstone raised over his father. “I meant only that my sire has need of me, for his flocks have grown in number just as yours have. I have served you long enough, Uncle. My wife and I will leave at Lammas.”

“Ah, Lammas. When all of Scotland celebrates the bountiful harvest.” Lachlan was practically beaming. “The *verra* date I’d chosen. ’Tis a sign.”

A sign? Jamie knew Lachlan was a superstitious sort, despite the man’s allegiance to the kirk. Lachlan insisted Neda cut every loaf of bread into three *farles* for luck, took care not to wear red and green together lest he suffer misfortune, and slept with his head to the east in the belief it would bring him riches. After waiting for an explanation, Jamie prompted him. “A sign of what, Uncle?”

“Providence.” Lachlan’s gray eyes were clear. Guileless. “I’ve come to realize the Almighty has blessed my lands because of you, Nephew.”

Jamie's mouth fell open. Never in all their dealings had the older man spoken so generously.

With a look of satisfaction, Lachlan splayed his blunt fingers and set to counting. "Since coming to Auchengray, you worked a full month without asking for a shilling, then labored for Rose's hand in marriage seven weeks, then seven months, aye? After that you served as husband to the ewes, choosing the *tups* and seeing the woolly lasses both bred and delivered of twins. Even Reverend Gordon sang your praises from the pulpit. Yet here you sit without *twa* coins to rub together." Lachlan reached across the corner of the table and clapped his hand on Jamie's shoulder, squeezing hard. "The hand of God is on you, James."

Jamie was so taken aback, his tongue felt glued to his teeth. "Sir, I...I am blessed...blessed to hear you say..."

"And you've blessed me." Lachlan released his grip on Jamie with a final squeeze, then stood. "I intend to sell the lambs at the Lammas Fair in Lockerbie, where they'll fetch a fine price."

Jamie watched Lachlan glance toward the spence, the room that served as his uncle's study and bedroom and contained all the man held dear—in particular, his wooden *thriftie* full of coins and bank notes. Lachlan's eyes then focused on Jamie, gleaming like the contents of his money box. "When you leave for Glentrool in August, I'll see your pockets full of silver."

Jamie stared at him, incredulous. Lachlan had accepted his departure plans so readily. Could the man's words be sincere? "I have worked hard for you, Uncle," he said slowly. "The proof is spread across your hills and glens."

"Then what shall I give you, lad? Name your price, and I will pay it."

All at once Jamie realized the truth: He did not want the coins his lambs would earn at Lockerbie; he wanted the lambs themselves. A seed of an idea that Duncan Hastings, the overseer of Auchengray, had once planted in his mind suddenly took root. *A plan tae see ye get half o' the lambs, seein' as they're all twins.* Just the thought of it made Jamie's pulse race. He would herd his share of the lambs to Glentrool and breed them with his father's hardy flocks. If the lambs were indeed blessed of God, only a fool would let them out of his sight.

“Do not give me silver.” Jamie surprised himself and his uncle more so. “Instead, let me have the smaller of the twin lambs. I’ll mark each runt as mine so you need not fear I’ve claimed one amiss.” He took a deep breath, letting his latest scheme settle in his mind, so quickly had he concocted it. “If you are in agreement, I will tend your flocks ’til Lammas, then take my family and my lambs west.”

Lachlan said nothing for a moment, studying Jamie as if weighing his resolve. “’Twill be no easy task, for sheep are not easily driven across rough land. They cannot be shod, nor will they ford moving water. You’ll cross the Urr, the Dee, the Fleet, and many a burn afore you see Loch Trool.”

Despite the wisdom of his uncle’s counsel, Jamie refused to be dissuaded. “I’ll haste to Dumfries for the *feeing* fair and hire enough *herds* to see the lambs safely home when the time comes.” He stood, infused with confidence, and stuck out his hand. “Are we agreed then?”

Lachlan offered his hand for a brief shake, then slid it inside his coat pocket. “I’ll see you get what you deserve.”

Three

The rose is fairest when 'tis budding new,
And hope is brightest when it dawns from fears.

SIR WALTER SCOTT

Mistress McKie? Are ye *unweel*?" Rose struggled to sit up, one hand pressed against her mouth. Had her sister, Leana, felt this ill when she carried Ian? How embarrassing to be found collapsed upon the lawn in a graceless heap! "Bless you for asking, Willie." She eyed the elderly servant, who stood a safe distance away as if what ailed her might be catching. "'Tis not the croup this time."

"*Guid.*" His cap bobbed up and down as he ventured closer. Even on a day as warm as this one, Willie kept his tattered wool bonnet firmly stationed on his balding head. "Neda said ye tore oot o' the *hoose* in a hurry."

"Dinner did not agree with me," she explained. Once Jamie informed Father of her condition, the whole of Auchengray would know why their mistress had fled from his table.

Rose gathered her skirts, then held out her hand for Willie's assistance. His gnarled fingers gripped hers and pulled her to her feet.

"God be *wi'ye, mem.*" Willie touched the brim of his plaid bonnet, then shuffled off toward the stables. Duncan Hastings found plenty for the orraman to do. Willie drove the chaise when needed; groomed Walloch, Bess, and the other horses; journeyed to Newabbey village on errands for the family; and performed whatever odd jobs he could still manage.

Rose watched his tottering gait with fond affection. One wintry week he'd escorted her to Aunt Meg's cottage in Twyneholm. Willie had driven Leana there as well on the night of Rose's wedding. But Leana had not returned home. Nor would she, Jamie said.

Standing amid her sister's gardens, Rose imagined Leana with her golden circle of braids bending over the pink gillyflowers, drinking in their fragrance sweet as cloves. An ache swelled inside Rose, like an old wound in rainy weather. *I miss you, dearie.*

Five years older and decades wiser, Leana had taken her little sister under her wing when Agness McBride died giving birth to Rose. Though the two were utterly different in temperament, their sisterly love had held fast, season after season. Until their cousin Jamie McKie had arrived two Octobers past and turned their lives *tapsalteerie*.

The tender way Jamie spoke her sister's name still gave Rose pause. He softened all the vowels, as any Lowlander would. Almost singing it, like a lullaby. *Leh-ah-nah*. Rose pronounced it that way too. But when Jamie said her sister's name, Rose detected a faint note of longing in his voice.

Och! She shook off the blades of grass that clung to her skirts. *She* was the woman carrying his child, was she not? His *son*, if intuition and custom could be trusted. That morning she had dangled a needle and thread over her womb. Back and forth it went, not round in a circle. A brother for Ian, then. Another son for her husband.

As if summoned by her thoughts, Jamie appeared at the back door. "There you are, lass." Her husband reached her side in a half-dozen strides, his long legs sheathed in doeskin breeches, his old boots freshly polished. The ewes would not see their master in the sheepfolds this afternoon; Jamie was dressed for business. "I'm headed to Dumfries for the last hours of the Whitsun Monday feeing fair," he explained, clasping her hand. "We'll need more herds come Lammas. Best to make arrangements now."

"More shepherds, you say?" Whatever had she missed?

"I've much to tell you, Rose. All of it good." The excitement in his voice was palpable. "Your father has agreed to let me take half the lambs with us at Lammas."

She let the unexpected news sink in, the silence between them punctuated by the bleating of sheep in the pastures surrounding the mains. "Lambs instead of silver?" A shiver of apprehension crawled up her spine. "Are you certain that's wise?"

Jamie laughed and drew her closer. "Listen to me, dear wife." His moss green eyes glowed with a fervor she'd not seen in many months. "Your father declared it a blessing to have me here. A *blessing*. That's what he said, Rose. 'The Almighty has blessed my lands because of you.' Have you e'er heard the likes of it?"

Nae, she had not. Nor did she believe her father meant a single word. Dared she tell her husband and dash his hopes to the ground?

"Jamie..." She looked up into his smiling face. "What if my father's praise is naught but a ruse? What if he's hiding something, hoping you'll miss the truth amid all his compliments?" When Jamie's smile began to fade, she rushed to add, "If Duncan were here, he'd tell you, 'Guid *wirds* cost nothing.'"

"Duncan is busy in Dumfries," he countered, the hurt evident in his voice. "He's feeing farmworkers for the harvest. It's time I joined him."

When he stepped back as if to leave, she did not release him but moved forward, her hands still resting on his forearms. "Please, Jamie. Tell me more about your agreement with Father. Your future is also mine, aye?"

Rose dutifully listened while her husband described his plans, praying her instincts were wrong, yet fearing the worst. *Jamie, dear Jamie, do not be fooled!* Though Lachlan McBride credited Jamie with Auchengray's increase, the man's wooden money box told a different story. She'd once spied a knotted gold cord stretched across her father's bounty of coins. Some folk might call it a harmless superstition meant to ensure wealth, but Rose knew better: A talisman from a *wutch* like Lillias Brown called upon darker powers.

"Come now, Rose." Jamie's tone softened. "What say you to my uncle's change of heart?"

"*Yours* is the heart I treasure." She looked down at the toes of her leather slippers, giving him time to respond in kind. When he said nothing, Rose swallowed her disappointment and lifted her head to meet his gaze. "I am glad you shall have your lambs."

The warmth in his eyes seemed genuine; so did the tenderness in his voice. "Rose, the lamb you carry matters most of all."

Oh, Jamie. Had his own heart changed? Might he return her affections at last? He had not confessed his love for her, not since Ian's birth October last. On the March day she had married Jamie, Rose had claimed her sister's husband and her son. No wonder Leana had fled from Auchengray. *And from me.*

"You're too quiet," Jamie chided her. "I ken where your thoughts have strayed. To a second-floor nursery where your stepson sleeps."

Afraid of what Jamie might read in her countenance, Rose donned a smile like one might a scarf, covering what she could. "I was indeed thinking of Ian. The lad will be waking soon." Rose released her hold on Jamie, knowing he must depart for Dumfries. "You'll be home before dark?"

"I will." He started toward the stables, inclining his head toward the kitchen door in passing "Do tell the household our news, for I ken how the waiting has tried your patience."

She watched him leave, even as the fragrant warmth of the kitchen pulled her into the house like a shepherd's crook. A copper-bottomed pot simmered on the hearth—barley broth, by the smell of it. In the adjacent scullery, steam rose from a great tub of sudsy water into which red-haired Annabel was dutifully plunging their greasy dinner plates. Lachlan did not approve of idle servants and forced them to work above and below their station. Annabel served as lady's maid to Rose when she wasn't chopping vegetables for Neda or gathering soiled garments for Mary, the laundress from Newabbey village. Across the brick-floored kitchen stood Leana's maid, Eliza, her arms full of table linens, a sandy curl poking out from beneath her white cap.

"Guid day tae ye, Mistress McKie," Eliza said brightly. "*Whan* yer lad *waukens*, I'll see tae his supper." Though her former mistress was gone, Eliza had continued caring for Ian, much to Rose's relief. Ian's naps grew shorter as the Lowland days grew longer. In another week the sun would rise even earlier than the servants did and would not disappear below the horizon until many had taken to their beds. "I'll find a proper spot for these," the maid said, "then head up the stair."

Rose sent Eliza on her way, knowing Ian would be glad to see the

cheerful girl who kept a sweetie in her apron pocket just for him. Though Rose loved the boy to distraction, she was still unsure of herself as a mother. A fortnight ago she'd carelessly tumbled down Auchengray Hill at nightfall with Ian clutched in her arms, frightening them both. By some miracle he'd escaped with only bruises and she with no more than a badly sprained knee. In seven months the Almighty would bless her with a bairn of her own. Rose prayed the household would share her joy and not cast wary gazes toward Twyneholm.

"*Leuk wha* has come tae see me." Neda emerged from the larder, a pot of marmalade in one hand, a fistful of almonds in the other. One glance at Rose and a smile creased Neda's ruddy face. "Methinks ye're not searchin' for victuals." She emptied her hands, then waved Rose over to a quieter corner, lowering her voice. "Are ye here *aboot* yer guid news?"

Rose laughed softly. "I cannot pull the wool over Neda Hastings's eyes."

"Ye canna," the older woman agreed with a wink, "since I dinna wear a periwig. Am I not the *mither* of grown *dochter*s? And a *granmither*? Ye'll hardly be keepin' *sic* blithe tidings from yer auld Neda." She aimed a pointed glance at Rose's waist. "I ken the signs."

"I am not far along," Rose cautioned her. "There might still be... complications. My mother..."

"*Wheesht*." Neda hushed her in the kindest of tones. "Dinna *fash* yerself. Ye're a healthy, *green* lass wi' naught tae fear. And growin' *mair* quickly than *mony* women do." She took Rose's hands in hers and squeezed tight. "Have ye written Leana?"

"Not yet," she confessed. "I shall send a letter before the week is out." Rose dreaded the prospect, for whatever would she say? *Forgive me, Leana*. Except there was no need to apologize, not for this. She was Jamie's true wife, however awkward the circumstances of their wedding. She had a perfect right to bear his child.

Still, the need for forgiveness lingered, despite her sister's generous vow. *Though you cannot forgive me, Rose, I forgive you*. Was that possible, when the truth Rose had once spoken cost her sister everything?

"She'll be happy for ye, Rose." Neda's unlined face reflected the sin-

cerity of her words. “But ye best write Leana *suin*, afore she hears it from *anither*.”

Later that evening Rose sat propped up in the curtained shadows of their box bed, waiting for Jamie to return from Dumfries. Built into the wall, the wooden bed was enclosed on three sides, leaving one long side open to the room. In winter Rose thought it cozy; in the summer, confining. Yet, in any season, her box bed was more comfortable than Aunt Meg’s hurlie bed at Burnside Cottage.

With her writing desk perched on her lap and a cluster of candles on the bedside table, Rose had started a letter to Leana half a dozen times, to no avail. *I have good news... Jamie and I have learned... Ian will have a brother or sister next January...* The words dried up each time, as if they were lodged inside the nub of her ink pen, needing only to be shaken out.

Forgive me, Leana. It always circled back to that.

After crumpling yet another sheet of expensive paper and tossing it to the floor, Rose reached for the letter from Jamie’s mother on the table, glad for any excuse to delay her task. Jamie had read aloud every word of Aunt Rowena’s post; he would not mind his wife’s perusing it again. Rose felt guilty nonetheless as she unfolded it with care lest she wrinkle the paper. Leaning nearer the flickering candlelight, she squinted at the elaborate hand that decorated the page with swirls and flourishes.

One thing became apparent with a second reading: Jamie’s *birsie* brother, born with red hair and a temper to match, was not the problem, or his mother would have stated so. Instead, the scandal at Auchengray had cooled his parents’ welcome; Rose was certain of it. The gossips of Monnigaff parish would *blether* for years about the heir of Glentroll and his two wives—first the older cousin, then the younger one—just as folk in Newabbey jabbered about it without ceasing.

She read her aunt’s words again. *Wait until Lammas.* Rowena’s meaning was unmistakable: *Stay away for now.*

Dropping the folded letter onto the table with a weary sigh, Rose

resigned herself to spending the better part of the summer at Auchengray. The endless days ahead would have been much cooler in the remote glen of Loch Trool, where northern winds blow down from the Merrick range, and the rushing waters of the Gairland Burn refresh the herds. When Jamie described the steep green hills, the granite crags, the blue depths of the loch, Rose saw them clearly in her mind's eye.

Two months seemed a long time to wait.

Remaining in her own parish offered one advantage: All of New-abbey would soon discover she was as fertile as Leana. Rose tucked her bedcovers round her, thinking how swiftly her news would travel from farm to village. "Have ye heard? Rose McKie is wi' child. She didna waste time catchin' up wi' her sister."

Her conscience did not let her gloat for long. Heat crawled up her neck, and contrition filled her soul. She did not wish to triumph over Leana. Not the sister who'd loved her from the day she was born. All Rose wanted was a house full of children tugging at her skirts.

Thanks be to God, Dr. Gilchrist's dire prediction last winter had proven false. The croup had not rendered her barren; instead, the Almighty had answered her prayers. *He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children.*

"Two children." Rose pictured dark-haired Ian in the nursery next door as she smoothed a hand across her stomach. "Leana's. And mine."