



Here Burns My Candle

A NOVEL

LIZ CURTIS
HIGGS

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *THORN IN MY HEART*

Here Burns My Candle



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For two treasured Elizabeths in my life:

*Elizabeth Crawford Potts,
my beloved mother,
who left this world too soon,
and*

*Elizabeth Sullivan McLain Higgs,
my precious daughter-in-law,
who brings our family such joy.*

*And for Bill,
always and forever.*



All the darkness in the world
cannot extinguish the light
of a single candle.

SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI



One

Night's black mantle
covers all alike.

Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas

Milne Square, Edinburgh

14 September 1745

Lady Marjory Kerr heard a frantic tapping at the bedchamber door, then her name, spoken with marked urgency.

“News from the Royal Bank, *mem.*”

At this hour? Marjory lifted her head from the pillow, her gaze drawn to the wooden shutters, closed for the night. The coals in the fireplace had faded to a dull glow. She squinted but could not read the clock on the mantelpiece. Had she slept at all?

“What is it, Peg?” Marjory called out.

Her maidservant answered in a breathless rush of words, “They’re moving the bank’s effects to the castle.”

The hairs on the back of Marjory’s neck rose. Transporting money and documents from the foot of New Bank Close to Edinburgh Castle involved a long climb up a winding street where brigands and thieves lurked in the shadows. The Royal Bank would never embark on so risky a venture. Not unless the day’s alarming reports had proven true.

“’Tis the *Hielanders*,” Peg whispered through the crack in the door as if the word itself might bring a hoard of savages thundering up the stair, brandishing their swords. “Folk say the rebel army will reach Linlithgow by morn.”

At that, Marjory flung off her bedcovers, any notion of sleep forgotten. Linlithgow Palace was less than twenty miles west. The army was too near her door. And far too near her sons, one of whom stood ready to bear arms at the slightest provocation. Was there nothing she could say to dissuade him?

She hurried across the carpet barefooted, too distraught to hunt for

her brocade slippers. All of Edinburgh had followed the ominous approach of the Highland rebels led by their bonny Prince Charlie. Determined to reclaim the British throne for his exiled father, James—*Jacobus* in Latin—the young prince and his loyal Jacobites were marching toward Scotland's capital, intent on capturing the city.

"May it not be so," Marjory said under her breath, then swept open the bedchamber door to find her maidservant perched on the threshold, her linen cap askew, her brown eyes filled with fear.

"What are we to do, *Leddy Kerr*?"

"Bolt the door at once." Marjory tightened the ribbons on her sleeping jacket, warding off the night air that seeped in, however fast the shutters. Her trembling had nothing to do with the fearsome Highlanders, she told herself. Nae, not for a moment. "Make haste, lass."

She watched Peg scurry through the darkened drawing room into the entrance hall, holding aloft her candle stub, which cast a pale circle of light on her tattered nightgown. Small for her seventeen years, with hair the color of a dull copper ha'penny, Peg Cargill was hardly a beauty. Her eyes were set unbecomingly close together, and her small nose disappeared amid a sea of freckles.

By the fire's glow Marjory caught a glimpse of herself in the silvery looking glass by her side. She quickly turned away but not before her thoughts came round to taunt her. *Hardly a beauty*. She touched her thinning crown of hair and her sagging chin, then sighed, wishing the glass offered better news. Had it not always been thus?

In her youth few gentlemen had taken note of her until they learned she was the daughter of Sir Eldon Nesbitt. Even then their gazes had fallen on her father's impressive property rather than on her unremarkable face or figure. Time had not improved matters.

Peg reappeared, bobbing a curtsy. "'Tis done, milady."

Marjory gestured toward the adjoining chambers, where her sons and their wives had retired for the night. "Have you told the others the news?"

"Nae." A faint blush tinted Peg's cheek. "I heard them...that is... Mr. Kerr..."

"See they're not disturbed," Marjory said firmly, wanting no details.

“And keep the stair door bolted.” She dismissed the girl with a nod, then locked the chamber door behind her. Let the Highlanders storm the crumbling walls of Edinburgh. They would not gain entrance to the Kerrs’ apartments. Mr. Baillie, the merchant who owned her residence, would see to that.

Alone once more Marjory lit a candle at the fireplace, then drew a steadying breath and knelt beside the canopied bed, as if preparing to offer her nightly prayers. Instead, she reached down and loosened one of the boards along the edge of the thick, woven carpet. Her servants, even her family members, believed the Kerr fortune rested safely among the Royal Bank’s effects, now bound for the castle. She alone knew the truth. Lord John Kerr had never trusted banks.

The board gave way, revealing a musty repository between the joists. Marjory bent closer, her nose wrinkling at the dank smell, her eyes seeking a cluster of leather purses in the flickering candlelight. *There.* The mere sight of them put her mind at ease. Nearly two dozen purses lay hidden beneath her chamber floor—a tribute to God’s provision and her late husband’s prudence.

She chose the nearest one, taking pleasure in its weight before slowly emptying the purse onto her bedding. One hundred gold guineas poured out, each coin stamped with the profile of her sovereign, King George. Marjory counted the lot, then set aside a few guineas for the coming week’s expenses and returned the bulging purse to its nesting place.

Greengrocers and fishmongers expected payment upon purchase. But mantua makers gladly extended credit if the Kerr women might display their gowns at the next public ball. Although a nervous town council might demand its citizens remain withindoors, ending their festive Thursday evenings at Assembly Close...

Nae, surely not!

Marjory sank onto the edge of her bed with a soft groan. What a dreary social season lay ahead with the rebel army afoot! No weekly visits to Lady Woodhall’s drawing room to share cups of tea and savory tidbits of gossip. No rainy afternoons spent with Lady Falconer, listening to country airs sung by a daughter of the gentry. No rounds of whist in

the affable company of Lord Dun. Nothing but royalist dragoons patrolling the High Street, bayonets at the ready.

A sharp knock at the adjoining bedchamber door made her jump, nearly spilling the handful of guineas from the bed onto the carpet. "Who is it?" she asked, unhappy with herself for sounding frightened.

"Donald," came the low reply.

Lightheaded with relief and grateful for his company, Marjory deposited the money on her dressing table and ushered her older son within, then closed the door as quickly as she'd opened it. With no central hallway in their apartments, each room had adjoining doors, one chamber leading to the next. Even among Edinburgh's wealthiest residents, privacy was rare.

"Forgive the intrusion, Mother." He looked down at her, candle in hand, his smooth brow gleaming. The cambric loosely tied at his neck could not hide the sharp lines of his collarbones. Ten years of dining on Edinburgh's finest mutton and beef, and still his frame remained as slender as a youth's. "'Tis late, I know," he apologized.

"The hour matters not." Marjory touched his cheek affectionately, struck afresh by the family resemblance. Donald had the same long nose Lord John once had, the same thin-lipped smile. "Look how the father's face lives in his issue," she quoted, testing him. It was a favorite pastime between mother and son.

"Ben Jonson," he answered, naming the playwright without hesitation.

Few gentlemen in Edinburgh were better read than Lord Donald. She'd made certain of it. Heir to the Kerr title and lands, he'd proven himself an attentive son and a faithful husband. If he was not yet a dotting father, that was no fault of his.

"Still in your boots," Marjory observed. "I thought you'd be long to bed by now."

The corners of his mouth twitched. "I will be shortly." He scanned the chamber, his gaze finally landing on the pile of coins glimmering in the candlelight. "Do you think it wise to leave your gold where anyone might find it?"

Donald not only looked like his father; he sounded like him. Mar-

jory swept the coins into her silk-fringed reticule and pulled the drawstrings taut. "We have far greater worries this night. The rebel army is nearing Linlithgow."

"Aye, Gibson told me." The stoic Neil Gibson, manservant to the household, took pride in keeping Donald and his younger brother well groomed and well informed. "I've come to put your mind at ease, Mother."

"I see." She chose her next words with care, keeping her tone light. "Does that mean you'll not be joining the Gentlemen Volunteers?" She watched his blue eyes for a flicker of interest. Hundreds of young men had enlisted in support of the royalist troops, many from Edinburgh's finest families. Lord willing, her sons would not be numbered among the recruits.

"I've no such plans," Donald confessed, "though I cannot speak for Andrew. You know his penchant for flintlock muskets."

She did know, much as it grieved her. Lord John had urged their second son to pursue a career in the military, despite her motherly protests. Pistols, swords, and a dozen French muskets decorated Andrew's bed-chamber walls. Even walking past his many weapons unnerved her. Monsieur Picard, their fencing master, had trained the lads well. But he'd done so for sport, not for battle.

That very afternoon Andrew had observed the Volunteers drilling in the College Yards. Marjory had counted the hours until he returned home for supper, then listened with a heavy heart as he regaled the family with stories of grizzled sergeants marching the lads through their paces. "Have no fear," Andrew had said soothingly at table. "The Lord Provost took no notice of me, Mother."

She was unconvinced then and even less so now, with his older brother paying a late-night visit. "I have your word?" she prompted Donald. "You'll not encourage Andrew to take up arms against the Highland rebels?"

He brushed aside her concerns. "Whatever you say."

Donald began circling her chamber, with its oil paintings and Chinese porcelain, its silk bed hangings and red lacquer commode. Piece by piece she'd had her favorite *plenishings* delivered from Tweedsford, their

estate in the Scottish Borders, until their rented Edinburgh rooms were filled to bursting.

When Donald paused at one of her windows and unfastened the painted shutter, Marjory's breath caught. Might a Jacobite spy be abroad at this hour? Pale and fair-haired, Donald would be easily spotted from the High Street below.

"No moon in sight," he observed, resting his forehead lightly on the glass. "No Highlanders either."

"They'll arrive soon enough." Marjory extinguished the candle by her bed, shrouding the room in darkness. "Sleep while you can, Donald. And keep that bonny wife of yours close at hand."

"Aye." The smile in his voice was unmistakable. "So I shall."

He left by way of the drawing room door rather than the one leading to his bedchamber. Bound for the kitchen, no doubt. He'd eaten very little at supper. Mrs. Edgar, their housekeeper, would not let him retire on an empty stomach.

Marjory closed the shutters, then returned to bed, determined to sleep however dire the news. Her beloved sons were safe beneath her roof. Nothing else mattered.

TWO

For Donald was the brawest man,
And Donald he was mine.

Robert Burns

Lady Elisabeth Kerr pushed her sewing needle through the thick wool, straining to hear the conversation next door. She could not fault Donald for visiting his mother's chamber. Even the Dowager Lady Kerr needed reassuring on so unsettling a night. Alas, little sound traveled through the thick blanket of books that lined their bedchamber walls. Whatever Donald and his mother were discussing was lost to her.

Nor could she hear Andrew and Janet in the other adjoining chamber, for which Elisabeth was exceedingly grateful. The couple, married only six months earlier, was determined to present the dowager with her first grandchild. "You've had two years to produce an heir," Janet had chided Elisabeth on the eve of her March wedding. "Now 'tis our turn."

What response could Elisabeth offer when her empty womb spoke on her behalf?

Nae. She pressed her silver thimble more firmly in place, refusing to dwell on the subject. A healthy woman of four-and-twenty had little cause for alarm. Surely a child would come in due season: a wee son to match her *braw* Lowlander with his high forehead and intelligent eyes.

Elisabeth drew the thread taut, pulling the button shank against the fabric. Not for Lord Kerr the new fashion of ending a gentleman's coat buttons at his waist. Instead, he insisted on an unbroken line of pewter buttons, neck to hem. Reaching for her scissors, she breathed in the night air, moist with the promise of rain. A fire burned low in the grate, barely dispelling the autumn chill. Peg would appear at dawn with fresh coals. Until then, Elisabeth counted on her husband to warm her hands and feet. "And your bonny nose," Donald often teased, capturing the soft tip between his slender knuckles.

Though she considered her nose overlong, Donald deemed it patriotic. "You've the finest profile of any lady in Scotland," he'd told her

only that morning. "To prove it, I shall have a cameo engraved in Paris, carved from the largest queen conch shell my guineas can buy." Her husband enjoyed making extravagant promises. Sometimes he even kept them.

Elisabeth looked up at her new lavender satin gown, pressed and waiting for the Sabbath and hanging from an ornate hook. It was a belated gift from Donald, meant for her May birthday but not delivered until Wednesday last. The sleeves were generously trimmed with two layers of the finest lace, the pleated embellishments on the bodice were made of silk gauze, and the ivory-trimmed stomacher was richly decorated with tiny buttons.

"'Tis a rare beauty," Donald had commented. "Like you, my love."

He'd beguiled her from the first, strolling into Angus MacPherson's tailoring shop one bright September day, seeking a new velvet coat. She was there by chance, delivering a customer's waistcoat she'd embroidered to earn a bit of silver. In Donald came, with his regal height and polished manners, a long queue of powdered hair curling down his back. Unwittingly, he'd praised her handiwork. "No man embellishes a buttonhole more cleverly than you do, MacPherson."

Angus had quickly confessed, "'Tis not my own skill with a needle that produced those fine stitches. Rather, Miss Ferguson here is to be commended."

Elisabeth still remembered Donald's frank appraisal. Some men found her height daunting. Lord Kerr's reaction was quite the opposite, his approval evident when his level gaze met hers. "You've the bearing of a queen, milady. Did I not see you at the Tron Kirk on the Sabbath last, seated with Mrs. Effie Sinclair of Blackfriars Wynd?" When she inclined her head, his smile broadened. "Ah, just as I thought. You are under her tutelage, then. A more respectable lady cannot be found in all of Edinburgh."

In a few short months Donald had won her heart. Not with his considerable wealth, his impressive title, or his handsome face. Rather, he treated her as an equal, discussing books, music, and society as if Elisabeth had grown up in a gentleman's household and could manage her end of the conversation. Somehow, she did.

That Yuletide Donald had ignored his mother's wishes and married her, Elisabeth Ferguson, a humble weaver's daughter. "Not to spite the Dowager Lady Kerr," he'd insisted, though he'd certainly done so. "I want you by my side, my bonny Highland Bess. To have and to hold, a wife good and true."

His tender words had burrowed deep inside her, crowding out the murmured warnings, the whispered concerns voiced by others. *Lord Kerr has a mistress. Two, some say. Guard your heart, for he'll not honor his vows.*

Elisabeth's hands stilled, the pewter button cold beneath her thumb. Doubt crept in once more, pervasive as the evening fog, clouding her thoughts. Donald had changed since then, had he not? This husband she loved and trusted with all her heart?

Season after season she'd pushed aside her fears, ignoring the faint rumors that ebbed and swelled in the street and on the stair, hinting at red-headed widows and comely maids. She'd had no reason to believe them, not when Donald was so attentive. He'd never come home bearing another woman's scent or tasting of another woman's kisses. Nor had she found a lady's handkerchief tucked in his pocket or a suspicious strand of hair caught in the fibers of his waistcoat.

But on Thursday last at Assembly Close when he'd danced the alle-mande with the Widow Montgomerie, a ripple had moved through the room. Heads turned. Eyebrows lifted. Voices whispered. Elisabeth had feigned indifference, keeping her smile firmly in place from first note to last and reclaiming her husband when the music ended.

She'd said nothing to him, certain the gossips were wrong. Though dalliances were common among the peerage, Lord Donald was cut from a different cloth. If he admired a woman in passing, Elisabeth praised her too, rather than give envy a toehold. When others fluttered their fans at Donald, she drew him closer, reminding herself that, come day's end, she alone would have the pleasure of his company.

However improper Donald's behavior might have been before their wedding, he did his duty by her now, did he not? Her skin warmed at the thought. *Aye, you certainly do, my love.*

While her diminishing candle measured the time, Elisabeth worked

at a steady pace and waited for Donald to return. Clearly the dowager needed more attention that evening than Elisabeth had imagined. Or perhaps Donald had wandered off to the kitchen, hungry for a slice of cold mutton.

Finished at last, she draped the damask coat across Donald's desk chair, hoping he might notice and be pleased. Her bedside candle flickered as the night wind found its way round the shutters. The hour was late indeed. Shivering, Elisabeth slipped beneath the covers and fixed her gaze on the adjoining chamber door, certain Donald would not tarry much longer.

At long last the bedchamber door creaked open. Donald stepped within, the amber light from the hearth gilding his features. Her husband wore his seven-and-twenty years well, with a noble air and a rakish grin.

"Come to bed," she beckoned him, stretching out her hand as he crossed the room. "The Sabbath dawn is almost upon us."

"'Tis five hours hence," he protested, sitting long enough to pull off his boots, then abandoning his clothes on the floor in a heap. He wet his thumb and forefinger and snuffed the candle with a deft touch. "I had in mind how we might spend one of those hours."

She smiled into the darkness. "Oh?"

In an instant he lay by her side, enveloping her in his warmth. "'Tis all your fault, dear Bess." His voice was low and tender as a caress. "I have a weakness for beautiful women."

"Is that so?" She smoothed her hand across his wheat-colored hair, cropped short to accommodate his wig, and discovered the fine strands were damp and cool, as if he'd been out of doors. Impossible, of course. He'd gone no farther than the next room. The familiar scent of him, the welcome sensation of his rough cheek against her skin dismissed any niggling concerns.

"I thought you might never come to bed," she scolded him lightly. "Did you satisfy her?"

He hesitated. "Beg pardon?"

"Your mother. Did you allay her concerns?"

“Oh, aye.” Donald relaxed at once. “She seems to think Andrew is in danger of taking up arms.”

Elisabeth met his gaze, a handbreadth away. “You’ve no desire to fight the Highlanders?”

“Nae,” he murmured, pulling her closer still, “for I’ve a Highland wife.”

Her eyes drifted shut as he brushed a kiss across her cheek. “No regrets?”

His lips touched the curve of her ear. “Banish any doubt on that score,” he whispered just before his mouth met hers.