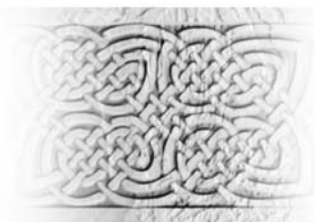




Thorn in My Heart

A NOVEL BY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

LIZ CURTIS HIGGS



Born in My Heart

LIZ CURTIS HIGGS



WATERBROOK
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THORN IN MY HEART

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All Scripture quotations are taken from the *King James Version* of the Bible.

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*To Sara Fortenberry,
who understands my passion
for writing fiction
better than anyone.*

*You were there from the first,
from that wintry day years ago
when this wee tale was born.*

*Thank you for encouraging me,
trusting me, believing in me.*

Love you, sis.



Glencaird

Glentrool

Glenhead

Loch
Dee

Raploch
Moss

Kenmure

House o'
the Hill

River
Dee

Monnigaff

Balm

N

River
Cree

Creetown

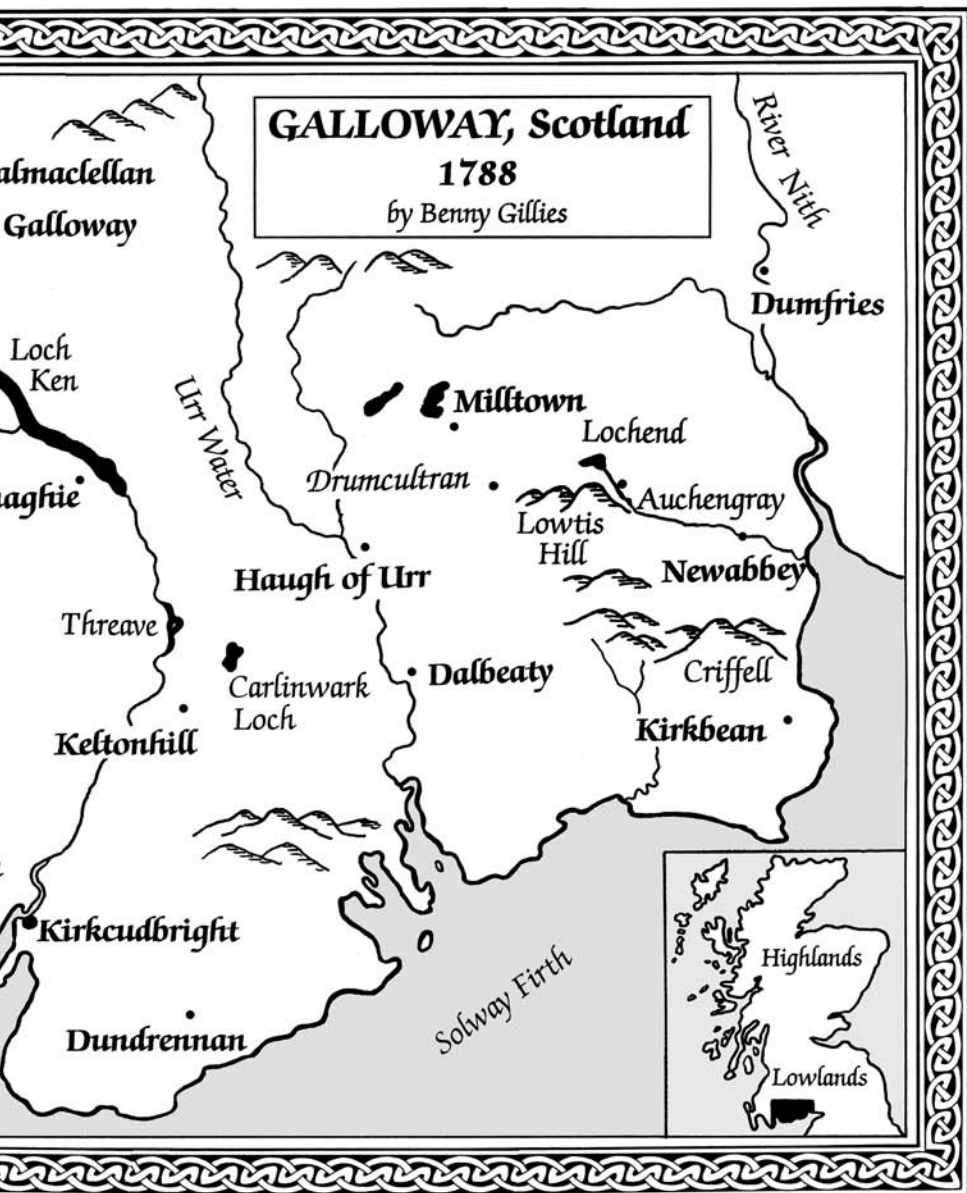
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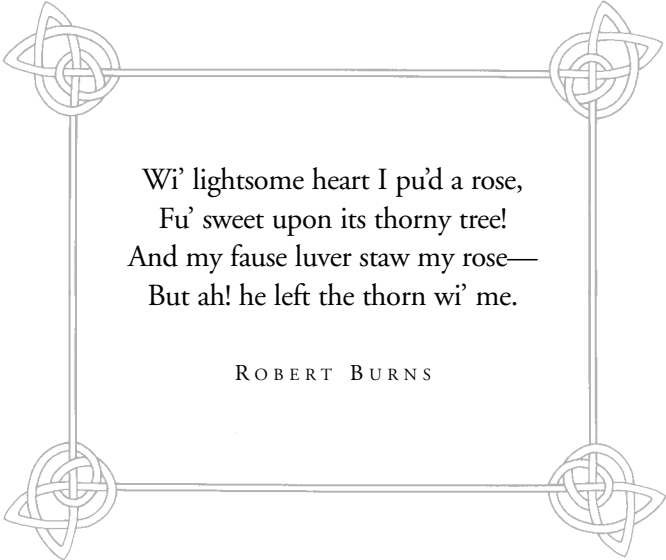
Twynesholm

0 1 2 3
MILES

Wigtown Bay







Wi' lightsome heart I pu'd a rose,
Fu' sweet upon its thorny tree!
And my fause luver staw my rose—
But ah! he left the thorn wi' me.

ROBERT BURNS

Prologue

My mother groan'd! my father wept.
Into the dangerous world I leapt.

WILLIAM BLAKE

Glen of Loch Trool
Summer 1764

Breathe not a word of my visit, Jean. Not to a soul.” The midwife merely nodded, opening the *bothy* door wider to receive her unexpected guest. Rowena McKie brushed past her into the cottage, then eased her ungainly body onto a rough bench. Her skirt caught on the splintery wood, and she snatched it free with an impatient yank. Another ragged seam for Ivy’s busy needle and thread to mend. “Tell me the babe’s coming soon, Jean. Mr. McKie can’t sleep at night for worrying.”

Carrying her husband’s heir through the long days of a Lowland summer had ground Rowena down like corn at McCracken’s mill. Her feet were swollen, her knees ached, and even fresh meadowsweet could not ease the burning in her stomach. Rowena pressed her damp palms against the unfinished oak and took the deepest breath she could. She’d come to the midwife for answers and had no intention of leaving without them.

“Now, now.” The older woman leaned over and squeezed Rowena’s shoulder, her touch as gentle as her words. “Nothin’ *mair* than nerves. Yer first time and all.” Jean’s eyes were wreathed in wrinkles and blue as forget-me-nots. Her dress was made of striped drugget, the too-snug bodice made for a younger woman. Beneath the ragged hem poked her bare feet, browned by the sun, the nails grass stained but neatly trimmed. “Ye were right to come knockin’ on my door. What would

folks in the glen be sayin' if I didn't tend to Mr. McKie's firstborn? Yer time is still a month off, but when it comes—"

"A month?" Rowena's eyes widened. "Are you daft, woman? I'll not last a week like this! Can't you see how the child moves within me?" To prove her claim she arched her back, inviting the midwife's inspection. "Look for yourself. Like a wild goat kicking his heels to one side, then the other."

"Mair than one wee goat." Jean smoothed her hands across the fabric of Rowena's dress, measuring the shape of her distended figure with a practiced eye. "*Twa*, I'd say."

Rowena's mouth dropped open. "Twins?"

The midwife nodded thoughtfully. "Boys, I'll wager."

Speechless, Rowena stared down at her belly. Her husband, Alec, had pleaded with the Almighty to bless her barren womb with a son. But two at once? Another kettle of fish, that. She rubbed her aching sides, feeling the child—children, if the midwife was right—moving beneath the gentle pressure of her hands. The walls of Glentool were built with a large family in mind. Would her aging body be so accommodating?

A swift kick in her abdomen seemed an uncanny answer. "Speak the truth, Jean. This constant commotion, the sharp pains in my ribs. Surely this can't be the usual way of things, even with twins?"

The midwife chewed on her lip, continuing to press and prod Rowena's middle. "Twa *bairns* are always harder on the *mither*. But I fear somethin' is amiss." A note of compassion crept into the older woman's voice. "How *auld* are ye, Mistress McKie?"

"Too old to be having my first, if that's what you mean." The worst of her many worries had come home to roost. "I'll be thirty-eight come November."

Jean made a *st-st* sound against her teeth. "If I weren't so certain this was the Lord's doin', I'd be gatherin' *stones* for yer burial cairn. But seein' how the Almighty has placed his hand upon yer womb, I'll be usin' these instead." She reached into the money pouch tied at her waist and unfolded her fingers to reveal two silver coins in her palm. "All ready to tuck into their fists. Ye know the custom?"

Rowena nodded, relieved to hear the woman's confident tone. Jean was a woman who feared the Almighty, not a common *wutch*. The silver pieces cast no spell; they were meant for good luck and the blessing of wealth. It seemed Jean expected the children to live. And so, please God, would she.

Rowena rose unsteadily to her feet, hoping the change in position might offer some relief. Instead it yielded another vicious kick from her hidden offspring and a jolt of pain at the base of her spine. Jean's passing comment crept into her bones like a damp mist, chilling her. "You said something is amiss?"

The midwife nodded slowly. "They're twins...but not the same. *Verra* different lads. One stronger than the other. By and by, the older will serve the younger."

Rowena's mouth went dry. *Twins but not twins*. A bad omen after all. She would see them baptized by the parish minister at the earliest possible hour. But the older serving the younger? That was not the Scottish way of things. Staring hard at the woman's unblinking blue gaze, Rowena searched her lined face for assurance. "Is this a word from the Almighty?"

"'Tis that, aye." Jean's gray head bobbed slowly up and down. "Time will prove me truthful."

"I've little doubt of that." For the moment she would let the subject rest. Jean Wilson was the finest *howdie* in Galloway. Rowena knew she would be in good hands when the time came. "I'd best be home before Mr. McKie discovers I'm gone and frets himself sick. I slipped out the door without telling him where I was going." She shrugged slightly, knowing Jean would understand. "He's *flash* enough these days, watching my belly grow." Rowena moved toward the door, gathering her light plaid about her shoulders. Summer or not, the evening winds blew a stout breeze across Loch Trool. "Don't stray far, Jean. I'll be sending my maidservant Ivy Findlay round soon enough. You'll be here when she calls?"

"I've not missed a birthin' in the glen all these years, Mistress McKie."

“Aye. By God’s mercy, mine will not be the first.”

Bidding her farewell, Rowena left the thatch-roofed cottage behind and picked her way along the winding path toward home. Awkward as she was of late, riding on horseback was impossible and a carriage out of the question, with no proper road and bogs at every turn.

Rowena slowed her steps, more exhausted than she could ever remember. And no wonder. *Twins!* All well and good for Alec, nearing sixty, to pray for an heir. He didn’t have the burden of carrying the babes. “Nor the challenge of bearing them,” she announced to a wheatear that flew over her shoulder, its black-and-white tail flirting like a lass’s fan.

She tilted her head back, taking in the steep slopes rising all around, so different from the rolling hills of east Galloway where she’d spent her girlhood. Mulldonach loomed on the right, where Robert the Bruce had claimed his first victory against the English troops by rolling great boulders down the steep slopes and crushing the army. Ahead rose Buchan Hill, once the hunting ground of Comyn, Earl of Buchan, now covered with McKie flocks. Rough and craggy at the top, the mountains gave way to slender stretches of grass and sparse, piney woods along the meandering loch.

At the heart of the glen stood the granite walls of Glentrool, the only laird’s house for miles and her home for the last twenty years. Guests marveled at the imposing tower house with its round turrets and soaring chimneys that stood in the shadow of the Fell of Eschoncan. When asked how it had been constructed in so remote a setting, Alec borrowed a tale from the Bruce and insisted, “The stanes rolled *doon* the mountain, and the *hoose* built itself!”

When Archibald McKie, Alec’s father, bartered a bride for his son from the distant parish of Newabbey, Glentrool had welcomed her with pine-scented arms. *Bartered* was not quite the way of it, Rowena reminded herself with a chuckle, but it was not far from the truth. Her brother, Lachlan, had urged her to marry Alec, and she’d agreed sight unseen. It was not merely the vast McKie lands that had appealed to Lachlan’s greedy nature. The fine gold bracelets McKie’s manservant

had slipped around her wrists were enticement as well. “A bonny bride is soon decorated,” young Lachlan had whispered in her ear, pocketing the silver McKie’s man had pressed into his own hands. “Haste to his side, lass, and let him see what his coin has purchased.”

Rowena and Alec were married a fortnight later with their parents’ ardent blessings.

How young she’d been! Eighteen, green as Galloway grass in May. What had she known of marriage, of life in the lonely glen, far from village and friend? She’d learned to care for her older, steady-tempered husband, even to love him as the years passed. Respect had not come so easily. Alec gave in too readily to her wishes. He was more wind-bent willow than stalwart oak, good man though he was. Rowena shook her head, thinking of all the times her headstrong nature had overwhelmed his passive one. “Such a *heidie* lass I’ve brought under my roof!” he would say, then pinch her cheek a bit harder than necessary. Willful she might be, but before summer’s end she would present him with not one heir, but two. It was a secret too good to keep, yet too dangerous to tell until the babes were safely tucked in her arms and away from the fairies’ grasp.

“*Och!*” Rowena yanked her skirts clear of a prickly blackthorn bush, imagining the seasons to come with two strong-willed young sons. Who would help her raise them when their father grew too old and weak to be of any use? Her parents were gone. And her brother lived in distant Newabbey, separated from her by mountains and moors.

“I’ll be needing your help, Lord,” she whispered, stepping gingerly along the mossy banks. “If I’m to raise my sons worthy of their father’s blessing, I canna do it alone.”

Rowena was anything but alone when her time came.

Half a dozen women gathered about her birthing room to witness the birth of the McKie heir. Rowena vaguely recognized their faces through the pain that hung over her like a shroud, yet she could not think of a single one of their names. Was that McTaggart’s widow in the stiff gray bonnet? Or one of the McMillans from Glenhead? Every one

of her neighbors would later insist that she was present at the birth. Rowena heard the women murmuring, felt their eyes on her. For the moment they offered more gossip than comfort.

She sat propped up in the midst of the enormous bed she shared with Alec, its heavy curtains drawn tightly back. The autumn sun streamed through the casement window and across her pillow, warming the room. In the hearth a fire blazed, to be used for boiling water as needed and for staving off the chill the evening air would bring. For now the heat only added to Rowena's misery. "Jean," she whispered, her mouth parched, her breath coming in gasps. "Thirsty."

The midwife dipped her finger in a cup of cool water and ran it along Rowena's lips to moisten them. "I canna *gie* ye anythin' to drink, Mistress McKie. Later, I promise, ye can have yer fill." Jean put the cup aside, then leaned over her, almost singing in a voice low and rhythmic: "Breathe now. There ye go. And again. That's the way." Jean smoothed Rowena's hair back from her brow and adjusted her pillow, then reached for a blue thread of spun wool stretched out on the bedside table. "Gie me yer ring finger, Mistress McKie."

Rowena obliged, lifting her hand from the sheets bunched around her in a futile attempt at modesty. As instructed, she breathed as deeply as she could while Jean's nimble fingers wound the blue thread around her finger, above her thick silver wedding band.

"Keep her safe from the fever, Almighty God," Jean intoned, tying the string in a neat bow, then squeezing Rowena's fingers against the knot. "'Twas your mither's and yer *granmither's* thread before that, aye?"

Rowena nodded. Both her foremothers had bravely survived their labor without succumbing to childbed fever—spared, it was thought, by the common blue thread. Rubbing her thumb over the worn wool, Rowena prayed it would bring her good fortune as well. So little about birthing was within a woman's control. Jean had placed the family Bible under her pillow, as custom dictated, and an old nail under her bed for safe measure, lest a changeling be substituted for the healthy babe. God alone knew how the day would end.

The midwife eyed the women gossiping across the room, then

leaned closer and whispered in Rowena's ear, "Come midnight we'll see the lads born." The two women had not breathed a word of their expectations to anyone, not even to Alec McKie. What, and bring ill luck knocking at the door? No, indeed.

Rowena studied Jean's face, hungry for more news. "Before midnight? Wednesday then?" The month, the day, the hour—every detail of the birth had a meaning. "Or will it be Thursday?"

"Hush now." Jean reached down and pressed two gnarled fingers to her lips. "The Lord knows, Mistress McKie. Trust him."

Before the hour ended, trust in God was all Rowena had left. Excruciating pain cleft her in two as the twins fought over who would appear first. Day dragged into evening. Eyes bleary, arms drooping at her side like broken wings, Rowena staggered around the room until she could walk no more. Drained of strength, she crouched in the bed, hands clutching her knees, and begged the heavens for mercy. At the end she could do naught but push when Jean demanded it, then fall back in an exhausted stupor, only to push again a moment later.

In desperation, the neighborhood women circled her bed, holding aloft their cherished family Bibles, pleading for the Almighty's enemies to be hurled into the Red Sea. "Help me," Rowena pleaded again and again. It was taking too long; it was all taking much too long.

The starless sky was black as pitch and every candle lit when the midwife finally shouted with glee, "I see a tuft of *bricht* red hair!" A cheer rang about the room, then busy hands hastened to their duties. Everything moved at a faster clip. Drenched in tears and sweat, Rowena made a final effort to end her agony. One floor below, the workings of an ancient clock began to grind loudly, preparing to strike the hour.

A cry split the air first.

"He's here! Yer son is born!" crowed Jean.

One. Two. Three.

Rowena sank into the bed, barely conscious as the distant chimes rang.

Four. Five. Six.

She could hear the babe whimpering as Jean called out, "Och!

There's a second child, there is! Close on his brother's heels. Ye'll not be long deliverin' this one."

Rowena felt the urge to push again.

Seven. Eight. Nine.

Jean's voice rang out, louder than the chimes. "One mair push, Mistress McKie, and ye'll have twa bairns lyin' in yer arms."

Ten. Eleven. Twelve.

The whole gathering held its breath until another lusty cry rang out in the crowded bedroom. The clock was silent now, but all else was in an uproar.

"Twa sons, they are! Twins!"

Rowena fell back on her pillow in a faint, while all around the room merry bedlam reigned. Amid the clamor Jean made short work of the cords with a sharp knife, then fed each child a wee spoonful of salt to chase away the fairies and gave them a quick dunking in cool water from the loch to make them strong and healthy. Dazed, Rowena could do nothing but watch as every precaution was taken. A candle fashioned from the root of a fir tree, cut into thin splinters and seeping with turpentine, was carried around her bed three times. Rowan twigs were tossed on the fire. Prayers were said by each woman in turn before passing a dish of oatmeal and water and supping three spoonfuls. With two fragile lives hanging in the balance, this was no time to put aside the old ways.

Jean left the others to their business and tended to Rowena's needs, clucking and fussing as she helped her sit up. She propped a bolster behind her, then firmly pressed a shivering, squalling infant into the crook of each arm, their wet bodies tightly wrapped in newly woven linen. "Nothin' alike, yer lads," Jean murmured, leaning closer as she pushed aside the soiled sheets. "See how the red one wears a hairy cloak, and the other has naught but a bit o' goose down on his head?"

Rowena could not take her eyes off their tiny faces, pinched and wrinkled, their hungry cries piercing her soul. "My sons," she whispered, brushing a light kiss on each head, fighting tears. Afraid to speak the names she'd chosen for them until the lads were baptized, she

pressed her cheek to their damp heads and in her heart lifted them to heaven in prayer: *Evan Alexander McKie*, the one with a full head of red hair and a lusty cry. *James Lachlan McKie*, his downy-capped younger brother. “May I love them both the same,” she said softly.

“’Twill be a challenge, different as they are,” Jean agreed, patting her arm. “Not even born on the same day, these twa. But both McKies, no mistakin’ that.”

Rowena pulled her attention away from her sons long enough to meet the midwife’s sympathetic gaze. “What do you mean they weren’t born on the same day?”

Jean glanced behind her, then crouched down until they were eye to eye. “Did ye notice the clock chimin’?”

“Aye, but...” Rowena’s limbs suddenly began to shake uncontrollably. “Wh-what...”

“Not to worry. To be expected, this chill of yours. ’Twill pass soon enough.” Ever efficient, Jean tucked woolen blankets around Rowena’s legs and shoulders, then lifted a cup of tepid tea to her lips. “Now then, about the time of birth. This red and *birsie* son of yers was born when Wednesday was on the wane. But this smooth one came after all twelve chimes ushered in Thursday. D’ye see how it is?”

Rowena stared down at their damp heads. “‘Wednesday’s child is full of woe,’” she whispered, a rhyme spoken by every Scottish mother from time out of mind.

Jean nodded, her jovial expression growing more serious. “Aye, so it is. And ‘Thursday’s child has far *tae* go.’”

“Oh, but not yet, wee one.” Rowena swallowed hard, horrified at the mere thought of the younger, smaller twin being taken from her side. *Jamie*. The look of his sweet, brown-tufted head had already stolen her heart. “Please, not yet.”

“Have no fear. Both will live.” Jean’s voice was low but firm. “The second one, born past midnight, will have the power to see the Spirit o’ God abroad in the land. He’s gifted, that one. Remember what I told ye the month last? ‘The older will serve the younger.’ See that ye don’t forget when the time comes.”

“When might that be?” Rowena’s shivering continued as she drew her babies closer still. “How will I know?”

Jean shrugged, not unkindly. “We *niver* know when or where, Mistress McKie. Like any mither, ye must stand at the ready. Almighty God will show ye what’s tae be done.” Jean squeezed her shoulder with frank affection, then gently touched each infant’s head. “And now, mistress, what else may I do for ye this *nicht*?”

A fresh spate of tears rolled down Rowena’s face and over her trembling lips. “Tell Mr. McKie...” She choked on her words, clutching her babies tight against her swollen breasts. “Tell him his prayers have been answered. God has seen fit to make him a father.”

One

And all to leave what with his toil he won,
To that unfeather'd two-legged thing, a son.

JOHN DRYDEN

Glentrool
Autumn 1788

Heaven help us, Jamie. Your father has... *Och!* I cannot bear it.” Jamie watched his mother storm about the fading gardens of Glentrool. Up and down she walked, hands waving through the air as she fretted over Alec McKie’s latest blunder. After two dozen years beneath her roof Jamie was well acquainted with his mother’s theatrics. He simply folded his arms across his blue serge waistcoat and waited.

The forenoon sun lit the grassy paths but did not warm them. A crisp autumn wind rustled through the pines and sent a golden pile of rowan leaves swirling about his buckskin breeches and her billowing gray skirts. Rowena, named for the hallowed tree with its bright red berries, grabbed the fabric of her dress with both hands and shook hard, sending dust and leaves flying. “It’s not fair, what the man has done. Not fair at all!”

“I’m sure you’re right, Mother.” A smile played at the corners of his mouth. Despite her age and agitated state, Rowena McKie still made a *sonsie* sight. In seasons past, reports of her coal-black hair and sparkling dark eyes had traveled from one end of Galloway to the other, from the harbor at Portpatrick to the *vennels* of Dumfries. Covetous men had eyed her at kirk and market alike, giving his father no end of trouble defending her honor and keeping ne’er-do-wells at bay. A bonny wife came at a steep price, Jamie realized, one he did not intend to pay unless the lass was verra bonny indeed.

Rowena gnawed at her bottom lip, her brow furrowed. The news was bad, it seemed. Whatever had taken place since they'd shared breakfast earlier, it was clear his father had outdone himself.

"Are you going to tell me what's happened, Mother, or must I guess?"

"Listen to me, Jamie." A long strand of hair, lately streaked with silver, fell to her neck. She tucked it back in place with graceful fingers, her gaze firmly locked with his. "It's about your brother."

Jamie grimaced. It was always about Evan.

"Your father summoned him. Sent Thomas Findlay out at dawn, as if the man had nothing better to do than scramble his way over the Rig of Stroan looking for your wayward brother. It took Thomas all morning to find him." She leaned toward him and lowered her voice to an urgent whisper. "You should have seen Evan dragging himself through the door in his filthy hunting plaid. That red mane of his was a tangled mess. And his *beard!* I'm ashamed to call him my firstborn."

Jamie merely nodded while his stomach bore the brunt of the news, twisting itself into a hard, painful knot. Rowena McKie might be ashamed of her older son, but Alec McKie doted on Evan, endlessly praising his keen hunter's eye and strong bow arm. "No doubt Evan came straightaway when he heard the news," Jamie grumbled. "He kens which side his bannock's buttered on."

His mother eyed him, one brow arched. "You'd be wise to do the same."

Jamie studied the toe of his boot, not wanting to provoke her displeasure. From nursery days he and his brother had been pitted against each other by their doting mother and father, compared and contrasted, weighed and measured like livestock: "Jamie is taller, aye, but Evan is stronger." "Jamie is clever, aye, but Evan is brave." If such comments were meant to be helpful, the plan had failed miserably. A bitter rivalry for their parents' favor had ensued. Aggravation turned to seething animosity as Alec and Rowena made their preferences all too apparent.

Jamie, less than a minute younger than his twin, had no claim on his father's heart at all. His mother's heart was another matter entirely:

Jamie owned the whole of it and Evan not a bit. Such had always been the case, and more so of late. His wayward brother strayed far from Glentrool's boundaries; Jamie stayed closer to home, keeping his mother company and the family ledgers neat. Evan cared little for social discourse; Jamie's manners were impeccable. Evan had married a woman his parents loathed; Jamie had prudently heeded his mother's advice concerning marriage. On three occasions he'd brought a lass home to Glentrool for his mother's assessment, and each time Rowena had whispered, "Not this one."

So be it. With his father's love and attention firmly settled on Evan, Jamie dared not risk losing his mother's favor as well by choosing an ill-suited bride. He had plenty of time to find a wife. For now, the verdant hills and rich flocks of Glentrool were more than enough to satisfy him.

"What sort of reception did Father give Evan?" Jamie asked, knowing the answer.

"He ignored your brother's slovenly appearance and welcomed him with open arms. Not that your father can see well enough to notice how your brother dresses, mind you. Instead, he *blethered* on and on about his two favorite subjects."

"His old age being one of them," Jamie offered, certain she would nod in agreement. "Did Father mention how he's *fey* and nigh to dying? And how his sight wanes by the hour?" Jamie regretted the glib tone of his words the minute he said them. The man was, after all, nearly blind. "So then. The other matter he discussed?"

"Dinner."

"Aye, it would be." Despite his failing eyesight, Alec McKie's appetite for savory meat remained sharp as ever, particularly when served with red currant jelly and roasted potatoes. Evan, skilled hunter that he was, courted their sire's approval with roe deer, hung to a high flavor, and fresh salmon pulled from the Minnoch. Jamie was too impatient for fishing, useless with firearms, worse with a bow. He could handle a sword when necessary or plant his fist in a man's gut if provoked. For the most part, words were his weapon and logic his armor. In the war to please his father, he'd been soundly beaten by Evan.

“Your father sent him off with quiver and bow, bound for the Wood of Cree to hunt wild game. Said he had a taste for venison.”

Jamie shrugged, not really caring. Family intrigues held no fascination for him. His mother thrived on them, so he humored her. “Tell me why Evan’s hunting concerns you.”

Her eyes sparked. “It’s your future that concerns me, James Lachlan McKie!” She stepped closer, hands clasped tight about her waist. Her pointed chin, as sharp as his, jutted upward. “Your father’s last words to Evan before he left were, ‘I want to give you my *blissin* before I die.’”

“His...blessing?” Jamie’s jaw tightened. Now she had his full attention. The man’s blessing was a great deal more than a kind word. His father meant to give his *heirship*—Glentrool and all the land’s riches—to Evan. *Evan*, his fool of a brother! Jamie could barely speak the words. “Glentrool will be...Evan’s?”

“*Wheesh!* Don’t even think such a thing! You alone are meant to claim it, Jamie.”

She’d said so before, dozens of times. That *he* should be his father’s heir. That he was the canny one, who managed the flocks and fields with a prudent eye. That it was the Almighty’s will he should rule Glentrool someday. Jamie had believed her because he wanted to, because he loved Glentrool and despised the brother who would inherit property he neither labored over nor deserved.

If his mother was right, Evan would claim Glentrool as his own. All the land, all the goats and sheep, and every room of the house.

“Do you know what this means?” Jamie ground out the words, turning on his heel to pace the ground. “The moment Father is dead, Evan will toss me out on the moors without a single guinea or a second thought.”

“Nae! I will not allow it.” His mother lunged after him and snatched his sleeve. “Do you hear me, Jamie? Your father did this on his own, without saying a word to me.”

He turned to find her eyes bright with unshed tears. “Is that what irks you most, Mother? That he didn’t seek your counsel?”

“Nae!” She swung away from him, her cheeks scarlet. He’d nicked her pride too near the bone. A moment later she turned back, her features cooled but her jaw firm. “What irks me most is a father who refuses to credit both his sons equally.” Her eyes narrowed. “And a son who’s forgotten all the things his mother has done for him.”

Jamie had no choice but to nod in acknowledgment. Hadn’t she made certain he slept in the largest bedroom and rode *Walloch*, the finest mount in the McKie stables? Wasn’t she the one who surrounded him with books, as expensive as they were to come by, and intervened whenever Evan appeared to be getting the upper hand? Gratitude was the least he could offer her, though at times the weight of her favor pressed down on his chest like a gravestone.

“You’ve done much for me, and I’m grateful.” He dipped his head, a gentleman’s bow. “What would you have me do in return?”

She slipped her hand through the crook of his elbow and led him farther away from the busy house, apart from listening ears and curious glances and windowpanes that shone down on them like the eyes of the Almighty. She inclined her head toward his and squeezed his arm affectionately. “I have a wee plan, Jamie.”

Hearing the warm note of persuasion in her voice, he knew he was doomed to do her bidding.

“Your father will be expecting Evan to serve him alone in the dining room, by his own hand in a week or so, will he not? A *gustie* haunch of venison and the best of our kitchen garden spread about Glentrool’s table like gifts for the king. An evening supper to close the day and seal Evan’s future, aye?”

Her vivid imagery sharpened Jamie’s tongue. “What has this to do with me?”

“Patience, lad.” She steered him along the leafy path, crushing rowan berries beneath her best shoes. “While your brother is off hunting south of Trool, you and I will be planning our own fine meal to garner an audience with your father.”

He jerked her to a stop. “I’m no hunter, and you ken it well.”

She lifted her head to meet his gaze. “You don’t hunt for goat meat,

Jamie.” Her smile creased the corners of her eyes, which shone like polished onyx. “Not with young goats aplenty on Buchan Hill.”

“Goats?” He shook his head, uncertain of her meaning. “Do you mean to serve him goat meat instead of venison?”

She brushed her hand through the air, as though plotting and scheming were a simple matter. “’Tis nothing to season one meat to taste like another. Did I not spend a girlhood summer learning cookery in Dumfries? We’ll serve your father a noontide meal a few days hence, long before Evan and his roebuck darken Glentroof’s kitchen door.”

“All well and good to disguise the meat. What of my own hide, Mother?” He glared at her, hoping he might alter the reckless course she’d charted. “I can alter my voice, but have you plans to smother me in spices as well?”

“Not spices, no. But something every bit as fragrant: your brother’s plaid.” Her smile stretched farther, revealing a row of teeth grown blunt with age. “Your father will not realize what he’s done, not until it’s too late. Until then, it will be our *saicret*, Jamie.” She stroked the fabric of his sleeve with a firm hand. “Yours and mine.”

Two

A secret at home is like rocks under tide.

DINAH MARIA MULOCK CRAIK

Newabbey Parish, East Galloway

“Was dinner to your liking, Father?”
Leana McBride sat at attention across the table from her father and watched while he dragged the back of his hand across his mouth, ignoring the linen napkin by his plate. His ebony hair, threaded with silver, was pulled back from his broad forehead and tied into a severe tail. The pewter buttons on his coat gleamed in the firelight.

“It was food, and it was eaten.” With a surly grunt, he pushed his chair away from the table and yanked his gray waistcoat into place, not once looking in her direction. Instead, his gaze shifted to the window and the darkening sky beyond it. “Storm blowing in from the west. See to it that the ripest apples are picked, Leana, or we’ll lose the best of them.” He waved his hand dismissively. “Go on with you. I’m expecting a visitor shortly. See that you don’t disturb us.”

She stood and dipped a slight curtsy, then headed for the orchard, gathering up two baskets at the kitchen door before letting it shut softly behind her. When Lachlan McBride was in one of his disagreeable moods, the sooner out of his presence, the better. Twenty years of trying to placate her father had not softened his bark nor toughened her skin. If she spoke up, he called her impertinent. If she remained silent, he pronounced her dull. She had no choice on such occasions but to seek the sanctuary of her gardens, knowing he wouldn’t bother to look for her. Little wonder no woman in Galloway would have her widowed father for a husband. Land and silver alone were not enough to warm a woman’s heart.

The blustery winds plucked at her neatly coiled braids as Leana made her way toward the family's meager grove of apple trees east of the house, where they were protected from the prevailing southwest winds. Her father's forecast was no exaggeration; the sun was nowhere to be seen. Heavy clouds were stacked, one behind the other, like huge boulders ready to tumble out of the sky. Against the slate-colored canvas, the round, yellow fruit shone brighter than usual, ripe and golden, begging to be picked. Leana wasted no time kilting her wool skirts around her legs and climbing the wooden ladder that stood propped against a gnarled trunk. Turning her back to the wind, she began picking all she could grasp, careful not to lose her balance. The pippin apples felt warm and smooth in her hands, the fruit still firm but not too hard for knife or tooth to penetrate. She filled one willow basket, then another, reaching and bending in quick succession, keenly aware of the wind growing colder and the sky more ominous.

The atmosphere suited her unsettled mood. At dawn a knot of apprehension had settled in her stomach, tightening as the morning dragged on. An inkling of something about to occur, something close to home, would not leave her in peace. What it might be, she could not fathom. Perhaps it was naught but a change in the weather.

Spying a few apples just beyond reach, she moved up another rung on her ladder, drinking in the view as she did. Her beloved Auchengray stretched around her, its fields burnished the color of antique gold. Three miles east stood the village of Newabbey with its cozy cottages and parish kirk that greeted the McBrides every Sabbath. The western horizon hung thick with rain that would soon water the elegant walled gardens of Maxwell Park. To the north stretched hilly woods of oak and ash, elm and beech, and, farther still, the bustling streets of Dumfries. Leana knew, without turning around, what loomed behind her: Tannock Hill and, beyond it, Criffell, rising nearly two thousand feet from shore to summit, dominating the Solway coast. Many a sailor claimed to have spied diamonds sparkling among Criffell's rocky crags, but no gemstones had ever been found, as often as the more ambitious among them had searched.

The distant bleating of sheep echoed across the hills, magnified by the hollowness of the air before the coming storm. The low clouds seemed close enough to touch. Leana craned her neck, trying to catch a glimpse of the flocks and her sister, Rose. Overseeing all of Auchengray and its flocks was Duncan Hastings's responsibility. But Rose, who couldn't bear to remain indoors a moment longer than necessary, invariably found some excuse to join the seasoned shepherd at his labors.

Leana, with her pale skin and sensitive eyes, stayed safely inside and away from the sun's glare. She tended her gardens at dawn when fog and mist offered a cloak of protection, then spent the balance of her daylight hours spinning wool or embroidering linen, squinting through her dreadful spectacles. She knew full well that her younger sister thought her overly cautious. "Shame on you for hiding in the house, Leana!" Rose had chided her recently. "You're much too *timorsome* for a McBride." Perhaps she *was* timid, but only compared to the bold and fearless Rose.

There were other differences between the sisters, some less obvious than the color of their eyes or the five years that separated them. Rose disliked routine; Leana thrived on it. Rose found a new interest every week; Leana was content with her gardening season after season. Rose maintained an ever-shifting collection of friends; Leana found quiet companionship among her borrowed books and occasional visits from Jessie Newall, a young married lass from a neighboring farm. Despite their differences, the sisters were as close as two rosebuds on the same thorny stem, bound together with a loyalty born of love and utter trust.

Leana climbed down the rickety ladder, grateful to have her feet on solid ground once more, and lifted the two heavy baskets of apples, pleased at the heft of them. If there were currants and cinnamon enough in the larder, their housekeeper, Neda Hastings, would see to it that fresh pies appeared on tomorrow's table and the next day as well. Leana hurried toward the kitchen door, the first drop of rain stinging her neck. Maybe Rose would help pare the apples or roll out the crust. Or maybe not.

Just beyond the cherry trees, a peal of laughter rang out. Seconds later Rose bounded into view, her thick, black braid bouncing behind her. “Leeeannaahhh!” she sang, twirling about in the stiff breeze, arms lifted to embrace the coming rain.

As Leana watched Rose gambol about like a lamb finding its footing, she felt a catch in her throat. *Dear, dear Rose*. Even at fifteen she was still a child. Her own child in many ways. A strong need to protect her younger sister swelled inside Leana like the Solway tide rushing to shore. Rose was so impetuous, even careless at times, blind to the dangers of the world beyond Auchengray’s whitewashed walls. It was that very innocence that made her utterly charming. And wholly vulnerable.

“I’ve missed dinner, haven’t I?” Rose laughed again, flinging open the back door with abandon, her eyes twinkling. “Naughty Rose, as usual. Father will kill me. Or you might.”

Leana grinned and shook her head, carting the harvested fruit over the threshold. “No one would dream of doing such a thing, Rose.” As she deposited the apples on the stone floor, she murmured, “Do keep your voice down though. Father’s expecting company and will not take kindly to your *roarie* ways.”

Rose sniffed dramatically. “No noisier than usual.”

“As you say.” Leana tugged her sister’s braid with genuine affection. “Upstairs with you now. See to your filthy hands and face.”

“Mothering me again, are you?”

“My favorite task,” Leana assured her, gently prodding her forward. “Every girl needs a mother, Rose. Neda stepped in to mother me years ago and later gave me the happy task of doing the same for you.”

“But I don’t need—”

“Wheesht!” Leana lifted a finger to her lips in warning. “I hear voices in the spence. Away with you, and not another word.” She watched Rose grab her skirts and disappear up the steps, lower lip protruding in a decided pout. Bless the girl, she would recover her good spirits by the time she rounded the bend on the stair.

Leana turned instinctively toward the men’s voices, curiosity drawing her to the closed door. Who’d come to call on such a *weatherful* day?

Her father's prudent ways and shrewd manner—bordering on dishonest, some whispered—made him the most successful bonnet laird in the shire, earning him the begrudging respect of the local gentry. A prosperous farmer and landowner, Lachlan had once merely worked the land, as Duncan now did, with a common wool cap known as a Scotch bonnet perched on his head. When Lachlan purchased Auchengray from the heritor some ten years past, his worn bonnet had given way to the three-cornered black hat of a gentleman. A man in his position might welcome anyone into his home, from lowly peasant to Lord Maxwell himself. One such person spoke with her father now...but *who*?

She stood outside the door, ears straining to hear. Strong winds whistling between the panes and rattling the shutters nearly drowned out the muted conversation in the spence. The family spent most of their waking hours in the larger living room, while the adjoining spence, a small parlor, was used for entertaining privileged guests. It held the best pieces of furniture, including her father's bed, as was the custom. The only drawback was the room's shallow hearth. When guests arrived, a wee stove with a bit of lighted turf inside served as a footstool, keeping their feet warm if nothing else.

But *which* guest, Leana wanted to know. Giving in to temptation, she leaned her ear against the wood just as the winds subsided and Lachlan McBride's sonorous voice carried through the door.

"My daughter Leana is the backbone of this household."

A warm glow filled her cheeks. Her father seldom spoke so kindly about her.

"Aye, I ken she's a hard worker, Mr. McBride."

A familiar voice. Older. Someone from the next parish, though his name evaded her. And what were they doing discussing her so freely? She pressed closer, straining to hear what else the mysterious neighbor might say.

"I've oft thought of how useful the lass might be at Nethercarse."

Useful? She backed away from the door, stunned. Was she no more than a servant to be hired away at Martinmas? Certainly not. In any case she'd hardly welcome a visit to Nethercarse, a large but dreary farm in

Kirkbean parish with a herd of *shilpit* cattle. They'd passed it many a time on the road to the Solway coast, the property poorly marked by a battered sign on a crumbling stone gate.

"But Leana is also useful here at Auchengray." Her father's voice sounded stern, almost defiant. "As it stands, I find your proposal unacceptable."

Her heart fluttered. *Proposal?*

On the other side of the door, Lachlan cleared his throat importantly. "Unless, that is, you truly...ah, value her many talents. Do I make myself clear? Come up with a more generous offer, Mr. McDougal, or I canna even consider it."

McDougal. Leana sank to her knees, her right shoulder sagging against the wood.

"You're a canny man, Mr. McBride," she heard the man grumble. "Always thinking of filling your *thriftite*, aren't you?"

"My money box is my business, Mr. McDougal. And so is my daughter."

Fergus McDougal. She'd seen him at market. He was past forty and looked older still—a dried-up, *ill-fashioned* farmer who'd worked his first wife into an early grave, leaving him with a house to manage and three growing children to feed. A widower, like her father. It seemed the men understood each other. Fergus McDougal needed a housekeeper and a governess, but a wife came cheaper. And Lachlan McBride needed silver more than he needed a daughter. Silver that would buy more sheep, expand his holdings, impress his neighbors.

"Make another offer come Monday," her father said. "I'll be expecting you."

Leana touched her hand to her throat, as though holding back all she might say, and felt her pulse pound against her trembling fingers. She was ready to marry, but not like this. A woman should marry for love. Not for money, nor for pride. And not Fergus McDougal. *Please God, no.*

The sudden scrape of chairs against the stone floor startled Leana to her feet. She darted through the living room, hearing the door behind

her unlatch at the very moment she turned down the hall toward the kitchen. Breathless with fear and dread, she stumbled into the kitchen and found Neda, head of their household servants, calmly plucking a chicken.

“Neda,” Leana managed between gulps of air. “Father is...well, he’s...”

“Talking to Fergus McDougal, I ken.” Neda yanked out another fistful of feathers. “Probably seein’ if that miserly man will sell him some dairy cows. Mr. McDougal is a man of means, though ye canna tell by the look of him.” She dropped the feathers into a basket by her feet, shaking her head as she did. “That *faither* of yers niver tires of makin’ a bargain, does he?”

“Nae.” Leana groaned, sinking onto a three-legged stool. “He doesn’t.”

Tree

Fathers by their children are undone.

WALTER VON DER VOGELWEIDE

Father will kill me. Or at the least disown me.”
“Jamie, *think!*” His mother threw her hands into the air, her patience clearly worn thin from days of pleading her case.

Jamie had done a good deal of thinking. In particular, he'd thought about how angry his father would be when he realized he'd blessed the wrong son—if the plan even succeeded, which he greatly doubted—and how furious his brother would be when he discovered his blessing had been stolen.

His mother's thoughts, on the other hand, were centered on his father's appetite. Standing in Glentrool's great stone kitchen, an apron tied over her good linen dress, Rowena McKie had spent most of the morning doing what she did best: marshaling dinner. Crockets of freshly churned butter and ripe cheese stood at attention. Baskets bearing the season's last harvest of beetroot and peas awaited further orders. Inside the brick oven nestled beside the massive hearth, fresh bread had passed muster and had baked to a crusty, golden brown.

Though Glentrool boasted a cook imported from Marseilles and a bevy of servants, his mother was happiest overseeing important meals herself. As a girl of seventeen, she'd studied the domestic arts in Dumfries, preparing herself for the day when a manor house would be hers to command. Her training was evident; she'd gone to great pains for an ordinary Saturday dinner. But then, Jamie reminded himself, this was no ordinary meal. Before it was over, he would be laird. Or he would be dead. When he mentioned that possibility to his mother, she lost what remained of her fine temper.

“Och! When has Alec McKie ever lifted a finger against his own

blood? Never, that's when." She snapped her fingers at the cook's helper, who in turn poked at the meat roasting on the spit. "Is it done, Betty? Seasoned to Mr. McKie's liking?"

Aubert Billaud, their *pernickitie* French cook, had long since abandoned his post in a huff, leaving Betty to fend for herself. Her red hair gathered up in a tidy knot, her face and hands freckled by the sun, the buxom lass kept her opinions to herself and merely nodded.

Rowena left nothing to chance. "A pinch of nutmeg, a pinch of mace, aye?"

"More than a pinch, Mistress McKie."

"Good. I've no further need of you then. Leave me to serve my husband."

Betty's eyes widened. "But, mistress—"

"Away with you! A wife can serve her husband a meal if she takes the notion, can't she?"

Jamie bit his tongue. When his mother boiled hot as Scotch broth, arguing with her was pointless. The girl quit the room without another word, her bare feet soundless on the flagstone floor. He watched the door latch behind her skirts and envied her escape.

"You chose well," his mother commented, nodding at the meat. "Two goats will hardly be missed among five thousand sheep." She moved about the hearth, stirring the various pots that hung over the fire, a self-satisfied smile on her lips. "We've *tatties* and *neeps* to serve with the meat and claret to wash it down. Your father's appetite should be more than sated."

Eying the generous portions, he imagined all the calamities the hour ahead might hold. "Potatoes and turnips won't hide the fact that this is not venison." He stared at her pointedly. "And that I'm Jamie, not Evan."

She met his gaze, then held it. Held it for so long he wondered if she would ever answer his charge. "If he asks, tell him it was a doe," she said evenly. "A young one. The flavor is milder."

His stomach sank. "Must I tell tales about the meat as well?"

"Aye, you must!" The spoon in her hand hit the edge of the iron pot with a sharp crack. "Are you so daft that you cannot feel disaster nipping

at your heels? Your brother's roebuck is already hanging in the meat cellar, cleaned and skinned, hours away from your father's table."

"Mother, I'm—"

"*Hours, Jamie!*" She pointed her spoon toward a pile of green shallots wrapped in a cloth, her hand trembling. "See those? Your brother's wretched wife picked them this morning, then strolled into my kitchen and announced, 'Mr. McKie likes shallots with his venison.' As if I don't know how my own husband likes his game!" Her voice, stretched tight as a hunter's bow, nearly broke. "That *donsie* woman is counting the minutes until her husband is the future laird of Glentrool and she its mistress."

Rowena despised her daughter-in-law. "Inferior English stock," she'd grumbled under her breath on Evan's wedding day. Judith was a Cumberland lass, a Sassenach from the south. That was enough for their mother. The girl was not to be admired or trusted for any reason. Jamie didn't much care for his sister-in-law's simpering, affected manner either but surprised himself by rising to her defense.

"Judith would never do such a thing."

"Now who's telling tales?" His mother exhaled slowly, her shoulders sagging as if she bore a heavy burden. "Son, if you have any regard for me or for Glentrool..."

It was a constant refrain. He had no choice but to answer, "You know that I do."

She circled the table, closing the gap between them. "Then you must go through with this, Jamie." She touched his arm, and her features softened. "Would that I'd told your father that *you* were the first-born from the very beginning and spared this day's deceptions."

"Would that you had," he agreed and meant it. "Too bad the midwife didn't tie a red string round my wrist like that babe in the *Buik*."

"Little help a scarlet thread would've been." She brushed a stubborn clump of hair back from his brow, then patted his cheek. "We'd have lost sight of it in your brother's red locks."

Evan and James. One red and woolly, one dark and smooth. Two brothers cut from altogether separate bolts of cloth. But only one could be hailed as McKie of Glentrool.

He turned to watch her wrestle the meat off the spit and onto a serv-

ing platter and knew the time had come to slip into his older brother's identity and spirit away his blessing. It was unthinkable. Unforgivable. Yet do it he would. For his mother's sake, aye, but for his own sake as well. Glentrool was more than land and livestock; it was his lifeblood.

Jamie asked her the one question that had haunted him for days. "How will I ever look Father in the eye again?"

She lifted her chin and offered a rueful smile. "Your father can't look any of us in the eye, blind as he is. That's why this scheme of mine will work." Glancing briefly at the door to the dining room, she added, "The day is gray and *dreich*, the fire dying, the room smoky with peat. Stay at arm's length, and keep your voice low, like your brother's." She finished arranging the vegetables around the goat meat, then rinsed her hands in a bowl of water and dried them on her apron before she pulled it off and discarded it in a basket of dirty linens. "Your father will smell Evan's hunting plaid on you, reeking of moss and heather, and be thoroughly convinced." She paused to adjust the woolen fabric draped across his shoulder, wrinkling her nose as she did. "When he tastes your seasoned meat, prepared just the way he likes it, your father will know without any doubt whatsoever that you're his beloved heir."

Jamie took a deep breath, wishing he could inhale her confidence, then glanced down at his hands. The hands of a gentleman, not a hunter. A terrible prospect gripped him. "What if Father touches me? My skin is smooth, and Evan's is—"

"Birsie. I remembered that in the dark of the night and nigh to fainted 'til I thought of something. Here." She thrust a small, furry bundle at him. "These should do."

He unfolded a pair of crudely fashioned goatskin gloves and brushed his hands over them in disbelief. "What sort of *swickerie* is this?" The fur was a dingy white, not bright red like the hair that covered Evan's arms and hands, but the color was of no consequence. *Clever woman*. He didn't need to *look* like his brother. He needed to *feel* like him. Though clearly made in haste, the snug gloves fit over his fingers like a second skin. He stuffed the ragged edges inside his cuffs, then stretched out his hands. "Mistress McKie, you amaze me."

She seemed pleased with the results and touched his gloved hands

to be sure. "They'll do. You'll see. Once he has eaten your food and blessed your head..." A slight shrug of her shoulders finished her thoughts. "He'll not be sorry, Jamie."

"When he discovers I'm not Evan, Father will be more than sorry. He'll be furious. And no wonder." Disgusted with himself, he snatched off the gloves and flung them on the floor. It was wrong, every deceiving bit of it. No matter how much he wanted to claim his father's blessing, he could not steal it and take pleasure in it as well. "He will banish me from Glentool and curse the day I was born."

Rowena's eyes grew black as midnight. "Then let him curse the woman who bore you."

"Mother! You don't know what you're saying."

"Aye, I most certainly do!" A hint of color moved across her cheeks. "I also knew the will of God when I heard it." She retrieved the gloves with a hasty swipe and pressed them firmly into his hands. "Remember what I've told you all these years?"

He mumbled a phrase she'd repeated more often than bore counting. Words that his mother insisted came from the Almighty himself and not from a mere midwife. *The older will serve the younger*. How many times had he soothed himself with that promise when Evan sent him to bed with bruises? Or thrown them in Evan's face when his older sibling had bested him at hawking? The time had come to test the prophecy made long ago in the glen of his birth. A glen that would become his inheritance within the hour, if his courage would hold.

"The howdie told me to be ready." Rowena wrapped the warm bread in a cloth and tucked it beneath his arm. "And so I am. The table is set with pewter, glass, and claret. Your father is waiting for his dinner." She lowered her voice to a faint whisper. "You want this, Jamie. I know you do. Now go."