

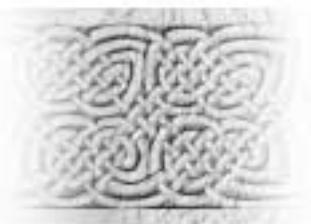
Fair as the Rose

A NOVEL

BY THE BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF THORN IN MY HEART

LIZ CURTIS HIGGS

Fair is the Rose



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*To Matt and Lilly Higgs,
the two best encouragers
a mother could hope for.
Your incredible support
makes my writing life possible.
I love you with all my heart.*

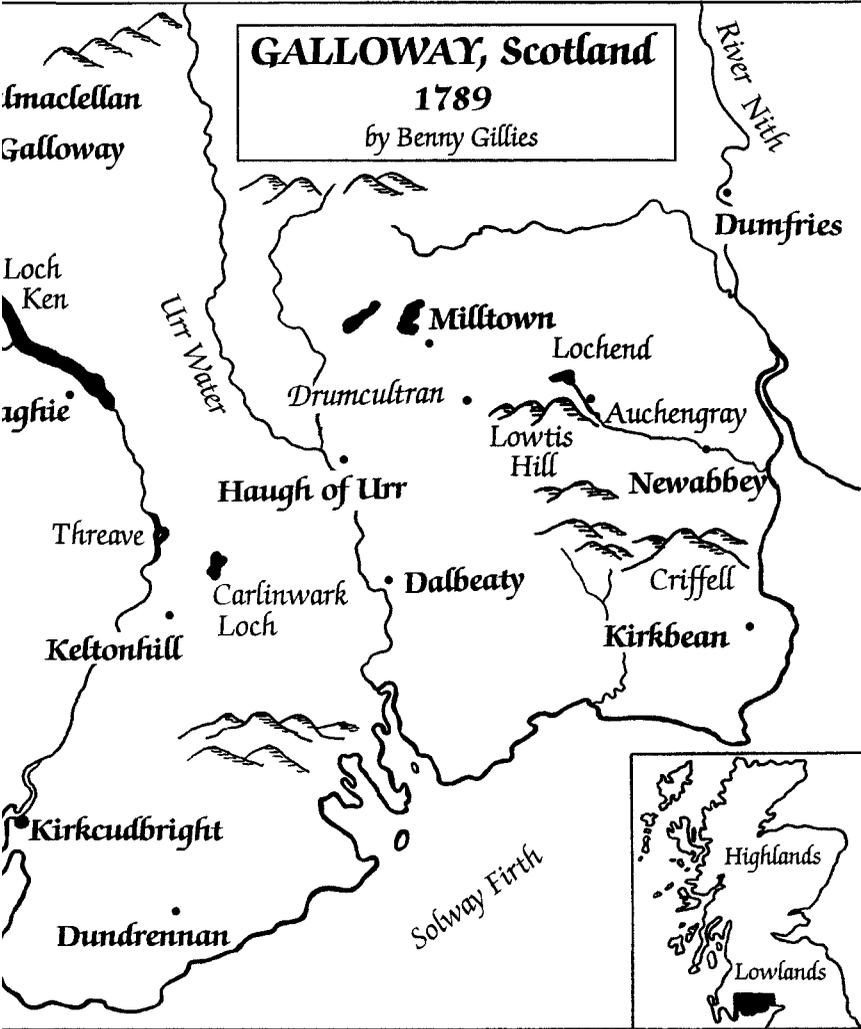
*To Bill Higgs,
for everything.*

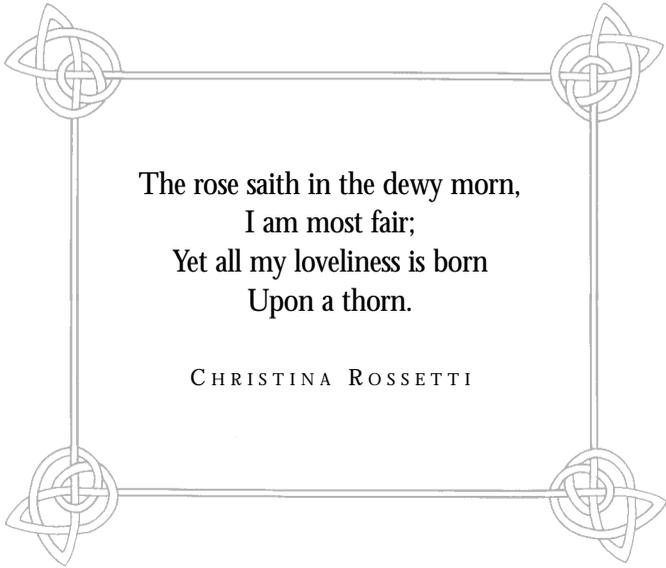


GALLOWAY, Scotland

1789

by Benny Gillies





The rose saith in the dewy morn,
I am most fair;
Yet all my loveliness is born
Upon a thorn.

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

One

Never wedding, ever wooing,
Still a lovelorn heart pursuing,
Read you not the wrong you're doing
In my cheek's pale hue?

THOMAS CAMPBELL

Newabbey Parish Manse

October 1789

Rose McBride pressed her back against the paneled wall, her gaze fixed on the man kneeling by her sister's bedside. She could not see Jamie McKie's face at that late hour. Only his sleek brown hair, tied at the nape of his neck, and his favorite blue waistcoat, crumpled from a long day of waiting for his son to be born. Moments after the child had made his entrance into the world, Jamie had appeared in the birthing room and sent her heart spinning.

He'd not come to see *her*; but Rose would see her fill of *him*. Aye, she would.

A peat fire burned low in the grate, barely warming the chilly room. The minister's spence served as a parlor during the day and as a bedroom and study in the evening. 'Twas the last place her sister had expected to give birth; when her labor had started in the middle of services, Leana had had little choice. Though Rose's knees ached from crouching in the same position for several minutes, she dared not move and risk discovery. Her beloved Jamie had yet to spy her hiding behind the high-backed chair in the darkest corner. She intended to keep it that way.

Now he was leaning toward her sister, Leana. Touching her hand, then caressing his son's wee head. The catch in his voice said more than his words. "Leana, will you forgive me?"

Nae! Rose bit down on her lower lip, fighting tears. *'Tis Leana's fault, not yours, Jamie.*

She could not hear the whispered words that followed, but her eyes told her more than she wanted to know. Leana brushed aside her damp blond hair and put the babe to her breast while Jamie stood gazing down at her, his growing fondness for Leana palpable even from a distance. Rose averted her gaze, though the tender image lingered. Why, oh, why hadn't she left the room with the others?

All at once they both laughed, and Leana's voice carried across the room. "One has found a way to come between us."

Rose swallowed hard. Did Leana mean the babe...or her?

"Nothing will come between us again," Jamie said firmly.

He means me. Rose clutched the back of the chair, feeling faint. Why would he say such a thing? *You love me, Jamie. You ken you do.*

Jamie entreated her sister with words no woman could resist. "Will you give me a chance to prove myself to you?"

Prove yourself? Oh, Jamie. Rose sank to the floor on her knees, not caring if they heard her, not caring if she drew another breath. Jamie, the handsome cousin who had kissed her that very morning, was prepared to put her aside like a dish of half-eaten pudding.

"We shall begin again," she heard her sister say. "Now then, tell me about your dream."

"So I will." A chair scraped against the wooden floor.

Much as Rose tried to resist, Jamie's voice, low and familiar, drew her like smoke to a flue. He spun a far-fetched story about the night he left his home in Glentrool and slept on a stony cairn among the crushed berries of a leafy Jacob's ladder plant. Then he dreamed of a mountain, he said, taller than any in Galloway and bright as a full moon in a midnight sky. Winged creatures moved up and down the mountainsides like stairsteps, and a voice roared like the sea.

"What did this...this *voice* tell you?" Leana asked.

When Jamie did not respond, Rose shifted to see him better, her curiosity aroused. In a twelvemonth, Jamie had not mentioned such a dream to her.

"Leana, it was a voice like no other. Wondrous. And *frichtsome*. The

words clapped like thunder: 'Behold, I am with you wherever you go. I will never leave you.' "

Leana gasped. "But, Jamie—"

"Aye, lass. The same words you whispered to me on our wedding night."

Nae! Rose pressed her hands to her ears at the very moment a sharp knock sounded at the door. Startled, she fell forward with a soft cry, her hiding place forgotten.

Leana's voice floated across the room. "Who's there, behind the chair?"

Rose drew back, her heart pounding beneath her stays. But it was too late. Taking a long, slow breath, she stood to her feet and did her best to look penitent.

The peat fire lit Jamie's astonished face. "Rose?"

Shame burned her cheeks. Before she could find words to explain herself, the door creaked open, and the coppery head of their housekeeper, Neda Hastings, appeared.

"Leana, I've come *tae* see ye get some rest..." Neda's words faded as she caught sight of Rose. "There ye are, lass! I *thocht* ye'd wandered off tae the kitchen."

"Nae." She could not look at Jamie. "I...I wanted to see...the baby."

"Come, dearie," Leana murmured, stretching out her hand. "You had only to ask."

Gathering her skirts and her courage about her, Rose crossed the wooden floor to Leana's bedside, barely noticing the others as her gaze fell on the tiny bundle in Leana's arms. "Isn't he a dear thing?" While Leana held back the linen blanket, Rose smoothed her hand across Ian's downy hair, as rich a brown as Jamie's own. "'Tis so soft," she whispered. Had she ever touched anything more precious? His little head fit perfectly within the cup of her hand.

"Would you like to hold him, Rose?"

Her breath caught. "Might I?" She bent down, surprised to find her arms were shaking. She'd held babies before, but not this one. Not Jamie's. "Ohh," she said when Leana placed the babe in the crook of her arm. "How warm he is!"

Rose held Ian close and bent her head over his, breathing in the scent of his skin, marveling at how pink he was. And how small. Deep inside her a longing stirred to life, as if some unnamed desire had waited for this moment to arrive. All of her sixteen years Rose had feared motherhood; the miracle in her arms put such foolish concerns to rest. Her mother had died in childbirth, yet Leana had lived, and so had her babe. "My own nephew," Rose said gently, stroking his cheek. "Ian James McKie."

No wonder Jamie was enchanted. Leana was not the one who'd stolen Jamie's heart this night; it was Ian, his newborn son.

Neda came up behind her, resting her hands on Rose's shoulders, peering round her to look at the babe. "Ye'll make a fine *mither* someday. Suppose ye *gie* Ian back tae yer sister afore he starts to *greet*."

"Aye." Rose did as she was told, chagrined at how cool and empty her arms felt.

"The *auld* wives say," Neda cooed, tucking Leana's bedcovers in place, "the child that's born on the Sabbath day is blithe and bonny and good and gay. Isn't that so, Mr. McKie?"

Jamie smiled down at his son. "Ian is all those things."

When Jamie lifted his head, Rose looked into his eyes, hoping she might find his love for her reflected there. "I'm sorry, Jamie. For hiding in the corner."

"No harm was done, Rose." His steady gaze confused her. Was he glad she was there? Or eager for her to leave?

Neda picked up the candle by the bed and waved it toward the door. "Go along, lass. And ye as well, Mr. McKie. Leana needs a bit *mair* care and a *guid* deal o' sleep. We'll bring yer wife and babe *hame* tae Auchengray soon."

Rose took her leave, pretending not to notice as Jamie bent down to kiss her sister's hand, then her brow, then her mouth, where he tarried longer than duty required. *Oh, Jamie*. Had his affections shifted so quickly? In a day? In an hour? Rose closed the door behind her, shutting out the worst of it. Her empty stomach squeezed itself into a hard knot, even as her chin began to wobble. She would not cry. She would *not*.

The hall was pitch-black, the last of the candles snuffed out by the thrifty minister's wife, who'd shooed her household off to bed an hour ago. Rose halted, unsure of her way in the darkness. Was that her green cloak hanging near the door or someone else's? She would need its thick woolen folds for the journey home.

Behind her the spence door shut with a faint click of the latch.

"Rose?"

Jamie. She could not bring herself to answer him, though she sensed him closing the distance between them, his footsteps echoing in the empty hall. His hand touched her waist. "Rose, you must understand..."

"I do understand." Her voice remained steady while the rest of her trembled. "Now that she has given you a healthy son, Leana is the one you love."

"Nae, Rose." Jamie grasped her elbow and spun her about. The heat of his fingers penetrated the fabric of her gown, and his eyes bored into hers. "To my shame, I do not love Leana. Not yet." He lowered his voice, tightening his grip on her arm. "But I will learn to love your sister. By all that's holy, I must, Rose. She is my wife, the mother of my son, and—"

"And she loves you."

He dared not disagree, for they both knew it was true. "Aye, she does."

"Well, so do I." Swallowing her pride, Rose reached up to caress his face, reveling at the rough feel of his unshaven skin. "And you love me, Jamie. You told me so again this morning, you said—"

"Things I should not have said on this or any other Sabbath." Jamie turned away, releasing his hold on her. "Something happened this day, Rose."

"Aye. Your son was born—"

"Before that, I mean. I had a discussion with Duncan." He hung his head. "More like a confession."

"Duncan, you say?" Neda's husband, the overseer of Auchengray, was a good man and kind. But unbending when it came to certain matters. "Whatever did you confess to him?"

“The truth.” The relief on Jamie’s face was visible even in the dim entrance hall. “I promised Duncan...nae, I promised God that I would be a good husband to Leana and a good father to Ian. I must keep that promise now. You ken I must.” He stared down at the flagstone floor, his voice strained. “Let me go, Rose. Please.”

“Let you *go*?” Her throat tightened. “But, Jamie, I love you. After all we’ve been through, how can you ask such a thing of me?”

“Because you love your sister.”

She cringed at the reminder. “Not as much as I love you.”

Jamie looked up. “You’ve loved her longer though. Every day of your life.”

“Not this day,” Rose protested, though they both knew she didn’t mean it. Hour after hour she’d held Leana’s hand, pleading with her not to die, praying for her with Neda and the others. Aye, she loved her sister. But she loved Jamie as well. How could she possibly let him go?

He took her hand and led her toward the hall bench, pulling her down onto the wooden seat next to him. “Rose...” His voice was as tender as she’d ever heard it. “I saw you with Ian. You were born to be a mother. And someday you will surely be one. But first you must find a husband of your own.”

“*Please*, Jamie!” Did he not understand? Did he not *see*? “*You* should have been my husband. And Ian my son—”

“*Nae!*” He fell back against the wall with a groan. “I beg you, do not say such things, Rose. ’Tis too late for all of that. God in his mercy has forgiven my unfaithful heart, and I will not disappoint him—or Leana—again.”

Her heart sank. “Instead you will disappoint me.”

“Aye, it seems I must.” Jamie turned toward her, his face a hand-breadth away. “Forgive me, darling Rose. You were my first love; I cannot deny it.”

His first love. But not his last. She closed her eyes. He was too near.

“I may never care for Leana as I have for you. But I must try. Don’t you see?”

“I...” She could hold back her tears no longer. “I only see that you don’t want me.”

“As my cousin, always. But not as my wife.” His grip tightened. “You must let me go, Rose. For Ian’s sake.”

She stood, tugging her hands free to wipe her cheeks, looking away lest he see the sorrow in her eyes. “You ask too much of me, Jamie. You ask...too much.” She fled for the front door, stopping long enough to fling her cloak over her shoulders before disappearing into the fog-shrouded night.

Two

Of all the joys that lighten suffering earth,
what joy is welcomed like a newborn child?

CAROLINE SHERIDAN NORTON

Leana clutched the babe to her breast and sank deeper into the heather mattress, realizing she'd used the last of her energy making Jamie feel welcome by her bedside. How attentive he'd been, with his gaze fixed on hers and his constant touches, gentle but firm, as though he were at last laying claim to his wife and child. *Please God, may it be so!* Jamie was gone to Auchengray now, leaving naught behind but his scent on Ian's linen blanket. She smiled, remembering his response when she'd worried over how she must look after her travail: *You look like the mother of my son.*

Mother. It was too much to take in all at once. The blessing and responsibility of her new role drifted down onto her shoulders like an invisible mantle from on high. "Mother," she whispered.

Neda's freckled brow knotted with concern. "Ye miss her, I ken."

"Aye." A shadow fell across Leana's heart. "Though 'twas not my mother I was thinking of just now."

"'Tis yer own duties that fill yer thoughts then. *Weel* and guid. Ye've no need o' *unheartsome* notions on this blithe day." Neda steadied the pitcher as she poured hot water into a shallow porcelain basin, tipping her head away from the rising steam. Her features remained unlined despite her fifty-odd years, but the slump of her shoulders bespoke her age well enough. "'Tis a shame yer mither did not live tae see this *granbairn* o' hers. Agness McBride would be mair than pleased *wi'* her daughter's labors." She put aside the pitcher, then soaked a small square of rough linen in the water and wrung it out with hands that stayed chapped and red no matter the season. "Ye did *verra* well, lass." Wiping Leana's forehead, then her cheeks, she added with a chuckle, "Born on

a Sabbath *nicht* in a parish manse, yer son is bound tae be a minister someday.”

“Aye, perhaps.” Leana tipped her chin as the wet cloth swept round her face, which had grown fuller in the last few months. If only she had Rose’s lithe neck! But Leana resembled their mother, a broad-cheeked, fair-haired Scotswoman, who had died giving birth to Rose sixteen years past. In her stead, Neda had offered a mother’s calming presence and caring touch, seeing to Leana’s every need, serving as maid and midwife from the moment Leana’s labor began during Reverend Gordon’s sermon. To think, the child was born in the man’s own home, in his own spence, in his own *bed!* The dour minister might never recover from the shocking sight of a bevy of female congregants taking flight from their pews, with Mistress Gordon leading the charge.

Leana looked down as Ian stirred in her arms. His features were still pink and pinched, his eyes closed tight in the flickering firelight. “*Baloo*, baloo, my wee, wee thing,” she sang softly, then brushed her lips against his velvety head. The smooth plane of his forehead and fullness of his lower lip were so like his father’s, tears sprang to her eyes. *Jamie, my Jamie*. Perhaps now she might dare speak the truth of her love abroad after months of pretending not to adore the husband she’d claimed. God had forgiven her for how it had all come about, of that Leana was certain. Rose was less generous with her mercy.

The damp cloth put aside, Neda slid her hands beneath the wriggling babe. “Will ye let me take him, lass? Gie ye *baith* a proper bathin’ this time?”

Leana hesitated, hating to lose the warmth of him, the slight weight of him pressed against her. Holding Ian was like holding Jamie’s heart; she was not willing to let either one move beyond her reach. “Only for a moment,” she said, releasing the lad with some reluctance. “Put him close by the hearth so he won’t become chilled.”

Neda clucked at her, shaking her head. “Already the dotin’ young mither, *oot* tae spoil yer son.” Nonetheless, she did what Leana requested, wrapping the child in a thick plaid and tucking him in a basket near the glowing peat. “Just ‘til yer mither is scrubbed and dressed in a clean shift,” Neda assured him. Her eyes shone with a grandmother’s

pride. Turning her attention to the master bed, she quickly saw to Leana's comfort, lifting her weak limbs to bathe her, bidding her stand only long enough to slip the shift over her head, then whisking off the bed linens and replacing them with fresh ones. Leana raised no objection when Neda slid the family Bible between the two thin mattresses, knowing the woman meant only to safeguard mother and child while they slept. A harmless old custom meant to keep away the fairies.

"See how little time yer bath took?" Neda chided her, brushing the last of the tangles from her damp hair. "Rest a moment while I tend tae Ian."

Leana watched, enthralled, as Neda bathed the child from crown to toes using her bare hands and the last of the soapy water, slipping her fingers between the soft creases of his flesh, ignoring his whimpers of protest. "Hush, little one," Leana murmured. The hour was late and the Gordon household long since retired, the reverend and his wife having found refuge in a spare bed up the stair. Neda patted the babe dry while Leana cooed, "She's almost finished with you, lad." At last, newly wrapped and smelling sweeter than ever, Ian was delivered to her waiting arms, where he settled into an exhausted sleep.

"See ye do the same, Leana." Neda regarded her with a look that brooked no argument. "From time oot o' mind every mither kens she must sleep *whan* her babe does or *niver* sleep at all. 'Tis why I'll not stay here in the spence this nicht and risk keepin' ye awake wi' me snorin'. But ye can be sure I'll be oot in the hall if ye need me." She showed Leana how to rest on her side with the babe cradled just so, a rolled blanket pressed against his back to hold him safely in place. "Ye'll not nap long afore young Ian will need nursin'. Did ye...that is, have ye had a go at that?"

"Aye, when Jamie was here with me," Leana admitted, her neck heating. "It went well, I think."

Neda said nothing for a moment, eying her. "Will ye be wantin' me tae find a village woman? Bring her tae Auchengray as yer wet nurse—"

"Nae," Leana said decisively. "Perhaps the gentry prefer to let a stranger nurse their children, but I..." She lowered her gaze, at once self-conscious. "I'd rather manage on my own."

“Guid.” Neda nodded, looking relieved. “‘Nurse yer *bairn* this year, and do yer work next year,’ goes the sayin’. ’Twas what yer mither did whan ye were born. God rest her soul, she could not do the same for wee Rose. But ye grew like a summer melon from yer mither’s milk.”

Leana touched her rounded cheek, fretting at the fullness she found there. “It seems I’m growing still.”

“*Och!* Ye’ve the face o’ a woman now, ’tis all. And if I may be *sae* bold, Mr. McKie seemed quite taken wi’ yer *sonsie* face this night.”

Leana pressed her lips tight to hold back a smile. Could it be true? “I must confess, my husband does seem...changed.”

“Mair than ye ken. This mornin’ outside the spence door Duncan prayed the man tae his knees.”

Leana gasped. “*Jamie?* On his knees?”

“If I tell ye mair, I’ll risk me own husband’s ire, but I’ll say this much, Mistress McKie.” Neda smoothed her hand across Leana’s brow, bending over her bed to whisper the rest of it. “Yer Jamie has pledged tae do right by ye and tae honor his marriage vows, whate’er it may cost him.”

Whate’er it may cost. Leana let the words sink in, past the doubt that had built a hedgerow round her heart, beyond the scars of old wounds. Less than an hour ago, in this very room, Jamie had begged her forgiveness, sincerity written across every feature of his handsome face. He had said—had he not?—that nothing would come between them again. He had pleaded for a chance to start over, to begin anew.

And she had agreed, not counting the cost.

“But it will cost him Rose.”

“’Tis not yer concern, Leana,” Neda said with a note of resolve, moving toward the door. “Jamie kens the cost and has called on the Almighty tae gie him strength.” Her chin jutted out, challenging any naysayers. “Wrong has prevailed *lang* enough at Auchengray. Right will soon reign o’er that household, or yer husband will answer tae mine.” The muffled bang of the door punctuated her charge as Neda disappeared into the hall.

Leana stared at the fire, almost too exhausted to sleep. Images of her dear sister nagged at her conscience. Rose holding Ian. Rose gazing at Jamie. Rose leaving the room alone. *Forgive me, Rose.* How often had

she said those words? On her wedding day. On the day she knew she was carrying Ian. And a hundred other days besides. If Jamie honored his vows now, as he had promised he would, Leana feared she might say the words forever. *Please, Rose. Forgive me.*

Sleep came but soon departed. Awakened by Ian's cry, Leana shifted her body to accommodate him, guiding his tiny, insistent mouth to her breast. She shivered beneath the heavy plaid, longing for a warming pan to skim across the bedsheets or a hot brick wrapped in cloth to nestle at her feet. No matter. She had Ian in her arms, and he was enough to warm her heart if not her body. The night passed slowly, interrupted by another feeding, then the need for a fresh linen blanket for Ian. Leana drifted in and out of sleep, her legs aching with a dull pain, as though she'd run all three miles to Auchengray and back again. As was customary, Neda had buried the afterbirth the moment it was delivered, then assured Leana that her body would mend in due course. "Next time 'twill be easier," Neda had declared. Leana cared not how difficult it might be, if God would only provide a brother or sister for Ian someday.

Night turned to gray morning. She awoke to the sounds of the Gordon household stirring to life and a firm tap at the spence door. "'Tis Neda, come tae see *aboot* the new mither." The housekeeper bustled into the spence holding a basin of steaming water. A maid bearing a candlelit breakfast tray was close on her heels, followed by another wide-eyed lass with an armload of towels. In short order mother and child were examined, changed, and fed, with their faces scrubbed clean and the bedding set aright.

"You're a very efficient nurse," Leana teased as the woman yanked the curtains aside to let in what little light the day had to offer. "'Tis clear why Father never calls for a doctor from Dumfries."

"Och!" Neda tied back the thick folds of fabric. "Yer *faither* is sparin' his coin, that's all." Lachlan McBride's miserly ways were common knowledge among his fellow bonnet lairds with whom he did business. No one suffered from his tightly drawn purse strings more than his own household. "Speakin' o' yer faither," Neda reminded her, "ye're tae expect him at nine o' the clock for a peek at his new granbairn."

Leana sat up straighter in bed, making sure she was modestly cov-

ered and the babe's face easily viewed. Any visit with her father, however brief, was a trial from which she seldom emerged unscathed. She would hold her head high this day, however. In January the kirk session had pronounced her a wife, and *yestreen* the Lord had declared her a mother.

She was still arranging the folds of her bedding when her father's voice boomed from the hall. "Daughter, I trust I may enter and see this grandson of mine."

"Aye, Father." She wet her lips, a nervous habit. "Do come in."

The door banged open. Neda and the others flew from the room like hens, arms flapping, their voices unnaturally high. Lachlan McBride marched in, his greatcoat dusting the floor behind him. He pulled a chair by the bedside in a single broad sweep and sat with some ceremony, brushing the dust from his trousers. The silver threads stitched through his ebony hair glistened in the candlelight. If he could mint them, Leana knew he would.

She offered him a slight smile. "As you can see, Ian James McKie has arrived safe and sound."

Her father eyed the drowsy babe with mild interest. "So he has." He touched Ian's head as though to make certain the boy was real, then drew his hand back. "Tell his father there'll be no running off to Glen-trool with my grandson. Ian must be raised at Auchengray. If the lad is to inherit my land someday, 'tis only right he think of it as his home."

"I'll tell him," Leana said, uneasy at the prospect of conveying such a message. Jamie chafed under Lachlan's tight reins, pulled more taut each day they remained in Newabbey and away from his own beloved parish of Monnigaff. Lachlan, both uncle and father-in-law to Jamie, served no one's interests but his own.

Her father then leaned forward to peer at her. "Quite a commotion you caused at the kirk *yestermorn*."

"Forgive me, Father," she murmured. "A woman cannot choose when and where such things will happen."

"When you insisted on going to the Sabbath services in your delicate condition, do you recall how I cautioned you against it?"

Leana remembered his words exactly—"not prudent"—but merely nodded.

“Aye, and now you’ve converted Reverend Gordon’s household into a coaching inn for the week. If you’d listened to me, your son would’ve been born at Auchengray, and you’d be comfortably settled in your own box bed at home. Am I right?” he barked, ignoring the babe, who wriggled in her arms. “Tell me, Daughter, am I right?”

“Aye, Father.” Leana forced herself to meet his gaze. “You always are.”