

GATEHAVEN

Molly Noble Bull

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*Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the
wiles of the devil.
Ephesians 6:11*

Author's Historical Notes

France was a traditional ally of the Scots, and some French Protestants, called Huguenots, resettled in Scotland, marrying into Scottish clans. Eventually they found themselves in the middle of an uprising between the Scots and their enemy, England.

After the union between England and Scotland, some Scots, called Jacobites, fought to undo what had already been done. However, their cause was finally lost on a moor at Culloden in 1746. Afterward, the Clans were forbidden to wear kilts and tartans. They were not allowed the playing of pipes or to own weapons of any kind. The Huguenots living in Scotland might have wondered what would be next, and it is not surprising that some searched for a new land where they could practice their religion in peace.

Some Huguenots settled in Luss, Scotland, and *Gatehaven* is set in Luss in 1784. In the heart of Loch Lomond country, Luss is a real place and quite ancient—perhaps a thousand years old. However, most of the novel takes place in a haunting mansion in northern England, and the story ends in America and the state of South Carolina.

Between 1754 and 1763 the English colonies, including South Carolina, were at war with the Indians and the French. The Long Cane Massacre of 1760 took place near present-day Troy, South Carolina, and it was mentioned briefly in *Gatehaven*.

Part One

A country estate in Northern England

Early January 1784

Monsieur Etienne Gabeau wasn't his *real* name.

His name was Leon Picard. But Etienne Gabeau was the only name he'd answered to since making England his home.

He stood at a window in his sitting room, smiling inwardly as he looked out. "The haunting presence that surrounds your mansion always amazes me, my lord."

The young earl made no reply.

"Christians who read the Bible might say the atmosphere at Gatehaven is quite the devil's doing. We both know why." Leon/Etienne's laugh had mocking overtones. He pulled his dark cape closer to his thin, shriveled body. "It's a bit chilly tonight. Surely you must have noticed."

"Of course I noticed." The earl laughed from across the room. "An icy rain was coming down when I arrived. You might have to put me in a spare bedroom for the night, Monsieur. And why did you mention the Bible? Who among *our* circle of friends pay any mind to it?"

"A point well taken." The Frenchman pushed back a curl from his eyes.

His thick mass of dark curly hair had more white strands than black, making Leon look older than his forty-five years. But twenty years ago, he was called handsome.

"Still," Leon continued, "to the local villagers your estate is quite mysterious. It reminds me of structures I saw in France, growing up. And who can forget the red gate which gave Gatehaven its name?"

"When did you learn of the red gate, Monsieur Gabeau?"

"I learned the secret when your late father was the earl. You were but a boy then." Lightning cracked the night sky. Thunder boomed.

"I saw it again, my lord."

"Really?" The earl's weak smile indicated that he was mildly interested. "What did you see?"

"Gatehaven...during that flash of lightning."

Someday I will have Rachel and own Gatehaven as well, Leon vowed mentally.

The earl cleared his throat. "I've decided not to go to Scotland after all, Monsieur."

"Not go?" Leon turned around in order to face him. "You *must* go." Leon Picard limped to his high-backed leather chair near the fireplace, tapping his cane on the pine floor as he went. "You *will* go."

"I beg your pardon."

"I said that you *will* go." Leon hooked his cane on the arm of his chair. Then he sat down and reached for the portrait on the small table beside him. "I demand it." Leon's words, spoken with his usual French accent, hung heavy in the air.

The earl didn't answer.

Leon thought that Edward Wellesley, the Earl of Northon, looked stiff—as if he'd suddenly turned to stone. At last the earl gazed at Leon from a chair facing his.

"Demand?" The muscles around the young earl's mouth slowly relaxed. "You have crossed the line, sir. Besides, I cannot go to Scotland. I have pressing business here."

However, a French gentleman like you should enjoy such a journey.” His smile was edged in sarcasm. “Why not go yourself?”

“On these crippled legs? I think not. Besides, she would never receive me.”

“I am sorry. But it would be impossible for me to leave the country at this time.”

Leon turned, gazing at the fire flickering and popping in the hearth. “You want the money, do you not?” He looked back at the earl like a hungry cat that cornered a mouse.

“But of course. You know I need money to pay my gambling debts.”

“Precisely.” Leon didn’t miss the fleeting expression of fear that crossed the younger man’s face. “I recently bought all your debts. I will destroy them all, but only if you do exactly what I say. At dawn on the morrow, you will set out for Scotland. And do dress warmly, my young friend. It will be cold out.”

The earl’s forehead wrinkled. “You say her last name is Aimee, and she lives in the village of Luss. But how would an English earl meet a Frenchwoman living in Scotland?”

“I believe your family owns a hunting lodge near Luss, does it not?”

The earl shrugged. “Even if I saw her on the street or near the Loch, I would never recognize her. What is she called?”

Leon’s quick laugh held a trace of mockery. “In France, she was called Rachel. I see no reason why that would not be her name today.” Leon grabbed the pearl handle of his cane with his left hand, leaned forward, and handed the portrait to Edward. “Look at this portrait carefully. Burn it into your brain. When you have brought her to me, your debts will be paid in full—and not a moment sooner.”

“But how can I convince her to come to England? I don’t even know the woman.”

“You are a fine-looking young man with your gold-colored locks and blue eyes. I am sure you will find a way.” Leon rubbed his aching knee. “Romance her. That should meet with success. Tell her you love her and plan to marry her. Women like that. And my spies tell me that she is not wedded at the moment.”

“You have known me long enough to know, sir, that I am not the marrying kind.”

“Have you no wits about you?” Leon sent the earl a harsh glance. “I don’t want you to actually marry her—only promise that you will.”

“I cannot see how...”

“Tell her you want her to come to England to meet your family before the engagement is formally announced.” He smiled. “Yes, that would be the thing. She is a peasant woman, but well educated. Apparently, at one time her father was a teacher and a historian of sorts; she will understand that you must have your mother and grandmother school her in the ways of the quality before she becomes a part of it. And do smile a lot, Lord Northon. Let her see those sparkling teeth of yours.”

“I will do as you say. But I doubt it can possibly work.”

“It *will* work. Or you could find yourself in debtor’s prison.” Leon sent the earl another smile—long and slow and filled with hidden meanings that only Leon and Lord Northon could know. “And on your way back to England, stop by the chapel near Edinburgh your grandmother told you about. Do you know the one I mean?”

“Of course.”

“I should like to hear the latest news from there. One can never learn too much about the craft—as I am sure you would agree.”

Part Two

Luss, Scotland—four months later

“The Earl of Northon?” Shannon’s mother stared at her with a hint of mockery in her eyes. “When did *he* ask you to be his wife?”

“Last night, Mama, after the service at our church. You saw me talking to him in plain sight. And I promised to travel to England with him to meet his family.”

“No!” Her mother popped up from the couch, her hands trembling. “That is out of the question. I will not allow it.”

“Will not allow it?” Shannon couldn’t believe what she had just heard. What could have caused her mother to be so upset? “Why, Mama? I thought you and Papa liked the earl.”

“I said the English earl was handsome. But Ian Colquhoun is handsome, too.”

“Did you refuse to let me go to England because you want me to marry Ian? Is that the real reason?”

Her mother shook her head. “I cannot allow you to go to England because I cannot go along as your chaperone—even if the baby were not on the way. It is much too dangerous.”

“Now Rachel.” Her father reached out and took her mother’s hand. “What happened in England was a long time ago.” He gently pulled Mama back down to the settee. Then he put his arm around her. “I agree with your concerns. But England should be safe for any of us now.”

“But Javier.”

“Do not worry, my love. With the baby coming and all, it would not be good for your health.”

Mama crossed her arms over her chest. “I cannot stop worrying.”

Papa gazed at her mother with gentle, comforting eyes. “Have you forgotten that we are under the shadow of the Almighty and that one day we will enter the pearly gates of heaven?”

His voice sounded as kind as he was. But Shannon noted a wrinkle on his forehead above his dark eyebrows.

“We moved here because we thought Scotland was a safe place for Huguenots to live,” her father said. “But Scotland is not fit for Scots or Huguenots since the British took over. Were it not for the fighting across the sea, we would have moved to Charles Towne years ago—where your Uncle Henri lives today. Henri thinks we should emigrate now, and I want us to leave as soon as possible.”

But did anyone care what Shannon thought or wanted? She’d made it clear that she wished to marry the earl and move to his estate in England. But was anybody listening?

“In the colonies, we will practice our faith in peace.” Her father hesitated before going on. “I have known some good Englishmen and some who are bad. Now I also know the earl.”

“With a few exceptions, I have no love for the British or the earl you say you love, Rachel Shannon. He talks to you before and after church meetings but seldom speaks to us. But even if I approved of him, I would never allow my only daughter to make such a journey without a chaperone.” He gazed down at her mother’s large belly. “Obviously, your mother cannot travel now. Your grandmother would not be of much

help either since she speaks mostly French. Besides, as I said, we plan to sail to the colonies as soon as the baby is able to travel. We expect you to go along with us.”

“Papa, you know I would never consider going to England until after my baby brother or sister is born. I made that clear to the earl. His aunt, Miss Foster, lives with other members of his family at the earl’s hunting lodge near here, and she has promised to serve as my chaperone. Miss Foster is coming with the earl when he comes to ask for my hand, and I know you will like her. She and her personal maid will ride along in the carriage with us. So as you can see, everything has been arranged.”

“Why must you go to England?” her mother asked. “It seems to me that the proper thing would be for his family to come to Scotland—to meet us.”

“The earl said that there are some things his mother and grandmother want to teach me.”

“Teach you? You’ve had a wonderful education. What do they expect you to learn?”

“They want—” Shannon hesitated. “I think they hope to teach me the social graces.”

“Social graces?” Her mother looked at her father, and they both frowned. “Perhaps you better explain.”

“We are not rich and titled like the earl’s family is. I would have thought you and Papa would be pleased that I will be marrying a wealthy and titled man.”

Mrs. Rachel Aimee bit her bottom lip. “No doubt his mother and grandmother want to teach you the correct way to pour English tea into a cup. Is that not so?”

Shannon didn’t answer because that probably was what the earl’s family had in mind. Maybe they didn’t approve of the match. Maybe her parents didn’t either. But Edward Wellesley, the Earl of Northon, said he loved her. And she loved him. Nothing else mattered.

She thought of the tender words of love that the earl had whispered in her ear at the ball and again after church on Sunday. She’d never been kissed by anyone but her parents. But one afternoon the earl pulled her into a shadowy area right there in the churchyard, and when nobody was looking, he kissed her. Her parents would be outraged if they knew. Still, she would never forget the thrill of it—the excitement. She would marry the earl if she had to run away to do it.

Her father stared at her for a moment. “It appears to me that the earl and his family do not think you are good enough.”

She blinked because she really hadn’t been listening.

“In return,” he went on, “I say that he is not good enough for you, and I intend to remind him of that when he comes here. Though we do not have a great deal of earthly wealth and do not even own the farm we live on, we are children of the King of the Universe, and we have a great deal of wealth stored where rust cannot change its value and thieves cannot steal it.”

“Please, Papa. Promise me that you will not say anything like that to the earl. And please refrain from speaking French in front of him.”

“And why not?”

Too late, Shannon realized that asking her father to make such a promise was not likely to soothe his ruffled feelings. He could feel insulted.

“Forgive me, Papa, for not showing you proper respect. But I wanted you to know that the earl and his family are acquainted with the French language but speak mostly English. They—they attend the Church of England every Lord’s Day—just like we attend our church.” Shannon wondered what to say next because the earl had implied that his family didn’t think God was as important as hers did. “Well, maybe they aren’t as devout as we are, but they do go to church. The earl has been attending our church since I met him at the ball, and he might take offense if we suggested that his family are not true believers.”

“Your mama and I have worried for some time that you are not as close to the Lord as we think you should be, Rachel Shannon.”

His words hit Shannon in the heart like a fiery dart. “Is it not true that I go to church every time you and Mama and Peter do?”

Her father slowly nodded.

“Yet you never once doubted that my brother is a good Christian. Only me.” Shannon’s voice quivered with hurt and embarrassment, and unless something was done, her watery eyes were sure to become encased in full-blown tears. “Why, Papa? Why is that so?”

“You must discover the answer to that question for yourself. In the meantime, your mother and I withhold our permission for you to go to England.”

Shannon felt drained—as if all hope had been surgically removed from her body. If she didn’t leave at once she might throw something across the room or disgrace herself in some other way.

“I have some thinking to do.” Shannon glanced toward the door. “May I be excused from this conversation? I would like to go for a walk.”

“Go. Your mother and I also have some thinking to do. But stay within the grounds of the farm. We would worry if you ventured out alone beyond the front gate.”

Shannon hurried outside. On the verge of exploding with pent-up anger, she kicked a rock with the toe of her brown leather shoe. It sailed through the air and landed on the grass a short distance away.

Her childhood friend, Ian Colquhoun, hit the trunk of a tree with both fists when he was angry. She’d also seen other Scottish men fighting trees and their demons in such a way. But her father was a gentle man. It was unlikely that he would do such a thing.

Shannon fisted her hands and stared at them. They looked fair and soft—unthreatening. Still, if a tree was nearby, she might wham it to discover for herself the advantage of giving in to primitive urges. The longer she stood there, the more she wanted to hit something.

She would find a way to go to England. She simply must.

#

Ian Colquhoun had heard some disturbing news. His sister, Kate, had said that Shannon Aimee planned to marry the Earl of Northon. Though Shannon begged Kate not to tell anyone, Kate told Ian the news right away.

He hurried down the road that led to the farm managed by Shannon’s father.

Ian had intended to marry Shannon as soon as he saved a bit more money. In fact, he’d planned to make Shannon his wife since they were children. It never occurred to him that she would fall in love with an arrogant snob like the earl. But now...

Oh, Shannon was a beauty, all right, with that long auburn hair and green eyes. It was not surprising that the earl would want her.

Ian's father had said that Shannon looked exactly like her mother did on the day she and her father arrived in Luss, and that Mrs. Aimee was still a handsome woman. Ian agreed. Shannon's mother was a very pretty lady. However, in his eyes, Mrs. Rachel Aimee could never compare in beauty and charm to Shannon, her lovely and exciting daughter.

True, Ian had never kissed Shannon or discussed topics like love and marriage, but he'd assumed she knew how he felt. Then he saw Shannon and the earl dancing together at a ball given by Ian's rich uncle, and he'd wondered if his chances to win her were lost.

But why would an English earl marry a Scottish girl like Shannon?

She had no wealth, no title or connections, and her parents came from France. The earl could pick from any number of attractive young women of quality in his own country. If the earl's intentions were less than honorable, Ian intended to prove it.

In fact, he would stop this union before it took place. He just needed to figure out how to do it.

Part Three

Shannon had only planned to go as far as the road that lined the farm where they lived. When she reached the gate that fronted the property, she stood there a moment.

Apparently, her parents thought her brother was perfect; therefore, Peter never had problems like this. He was three years older than Shannon, but if Peter had wanted to go to England when he was nineteen, he would have been given permission as soon as he asked.

"Peter is the sort of boy a man can be proud of," her father once said.

Then her mother had added, "And he takes his responsibilities seriously."

Her mother didn't actually say that Shannon never took her responsibilities seriously or that she acted like a child, but she might as well have. In Shannon's mind, her parents' true feelings were clear enough.

Peter wanted to immigrate to the colonies where Uncle Henri and his new wife lived, and he'd convinced Grandma and their parents to travel with him. Mama and Papa would insist that Shannon immigrate too. But how could she? If only she could convince them that her future was with the earl.

The early autumn air felt cool on her face. The bushes and grass that edged the road clung to the thin, rocky soil like a lifeline, and though there weren't many trees, the few she saw pointed upward to a clear and windless sky.

In the distance, heather bloomed sweetly, coloring the hillsides in shades of pale purple and gray. She took in a deep breath and released it slowly. Despite everything, she savored the moment.

The farm didn't front the loch like Ian's farm did. But sometimes when the wind was right, she smelled the faint odor of the sea.

Today, a mist slowly draped the landscape like it often did over the Loch.

Shannon shivered. There was something haunting about a mist—especially when it hung over the smooth yet deep waters of the loch like old lace. When they were children, Ian had often taken Shannon and her brother out on his small boat on sunny afternoons in summer when the sky was clear.

They picnicked on a nearby shore, and sometimes on their way home, she would lean over the side of the boat, dip her fingertips in the cold water, and gaze at the rocky shore. She never tired of studying her surroundings—green hills and a lake as big as the sky.

“Do not do that, lass,” Ian would say. “Sit right in the boat. If ya lean over like that, you could upset the balance. We could go tumbling into the loch.”

Ian was the tallest and handsomest young man in Luss. Everybody thought so. He watched after her like an older brother might, but Shannon already had a brother. She would love Ian forever, but he didn’t make her heart beat faster. Just looking at the earl did.

The Earl, Edward.

Thoughts of her recent conversation with her parents blocked out everything else. She longed to see the earl—needed to see him—at once.

He was staying at his hunting lodge, but sometimes he came to church in town.

“To see you,” he had said.

The village of Luss beckoned. She never went to the village unless Mama or her brother went with her. Today, she would. She would stroll down the country road until she reached the village and pay a visit to her grandmother. Grandma Aimee might be the very one to convince Papa to change his mind and let her go to England with the earl.

The earl had men working for him. Shannon called them his spies because whenever she entered the village, she found them watching her. Sometimes the earl would appear a few minutes later whether at church or at the shop where she and her mother bought bread. Maybe she would see him again today.

Her heart beat faster with the hope.

She was about to cross the bridge over a small stream when she noticed Ian strolling briskly at the water’s edge. Ian’s father was the second son of the Laird of the village, and though his family lived as modestly as hers, Ian’s last name had always given him a certain prestige among the villagers that newcomers, like the Aimee family, had never known.

Ian didn’t appear to have seen her yet.

The soles of her shoes tapped the wooden bridge. He probably couldn’t have heard, but he looked up.

If only he’d smiled. His smile always warmed her—even on the coldest day in winter. Merely looking at him made her almost forget her troubles at home, and she’d always counted on Ian in her time of need. Maybe he would be willing to talk to her father about the earl on Shannon’s behalf.

“Good morning, Ian.”

“Morning, lass. I am surprised to see you walking out here alone.”

Normally, dimples dotted both his cheeks, and his wide smile lifted her spirits. Today, the sun hid behind the clouds, and she saw no smile at all. Today his hair looked as thick and dark brown as her father’s. Yet on other mornings, the sun turned it almost as red as her own.

“Where is your brother?” Ian asked.

“You would have to ask Peter where he went this morning.”

“What brings you to the village so early in the day?”

“I thought I would visit my grandmother. She has been feeling poorly of late. It was time I paid her a visit.”

“Mind if I walk along?”

She turned. “Please do. I would appreciate the company.”

“Maybe we should take the road nearest the Loch. We are less likely to be seen there this time of day, and we would not want to damage your good name.”

Shannon looked up at him and smiled. Despite the tender sound of his words, the flesh around his lips tightened, and he didn’t smile back.

Her head barely reached his shoulders, and he’d always walked with a long stride. Yet when they walked together, he often set his pace to fit hers. Today she had to practically run to keep up.

Obviously, his normal good humor had faded. She would need to find a way to revive it.

“Ian, I’ve known for a long time that you hope to go into the ministry. Have you found a mentor yet—now that our pastor will retire to his sister’s home in the country soon?”

“Not yet, I am afraid.”

“My father would be willing to teach you about the Bible. But that would never make you a man of the cloth. However, I know someone who might.”

“And who would that be?”

“I am sure you know that the Earl of Northon has a hunting lodge near here. But you might not have heard that I agreed to marry him.”

“Aye.” He glanced away. “I saw you dancing with him at my uncle’s ball.”

Then he looked down at his feet like he always did when he didn’t want to say more.

Shannon scolded herself internally for feeling obligated to rush into a long explanation. She had the right to marry whomever she pleased. At the same time, Ian was her oldest and dearest friend.

“I know it seems unlikely that a man of the quality would choose me—a young woman with no money or high station in life. But as amazing as it might sound, he loves me, Ian, and I love him. It would so please me if you told Papa you agree with the match.”

“Apparently, congratulations are in order,” Ian said, ignoring her request. “But what does any of that have to do with me?”

“I am getting to that.” She was talking much too fast and probably telling more than he needed to know. “You see, the earl employs a vicar to tend to the spiritual needs of his family and those who live in the village nearby, and every few years they select a young man to come and live at the vicarage and learn from the vicar. They are looking for such a young man right now. All I would need to do is say the word, and I am sure the earl would choose you.”

Shannon had tried to fill her voice with the promise of great things to come. However, Ian’s cold glance indicated that he hadn’t received her suggestion with interest and excitement as she’d hoped.

“Like your parents, I am a member of the reformed church,” he replied. “What benefit would learning the ways of the Church of England be to me?”

She tried not to roll her eyes. “Is it not true that just last Sunday our pastor said that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever? So the earl’s church must be more or less the same as ours.”

He shook his head. “I disagree about all the churches being the same.”

“Still, how could serving under an English vicar not help in your quest to become a pastor?” Shannon’s lips turned up at the edges. “Besides, I would miss you terribly if you did not go to England with us.”

“Would you now?”

“Most certainly. You are my oldest and dearest friend. Please say you will go.”

“I cannot promise. But I will agree to think about it.”

If Shannon were Ian’s judge, she would say that he wasn’t as happy about her good fortune as she had hoped. In fact, she didn’t think Ian wanted her to go to England at all.

He gazed at her like a provoked parent might do. “To be completely honest, lass, I do not trust the earl. I feel it my duty to warn you. Continued association with this man could put you and perhaps your entire family in danger.”

Shannon bit her lower lip to keep from saying something she might regret later. As much as she loved and trusted Ian, she was in love with the earl. Why didn’t Ian understand?

Her grandmother wasn’t home, and Shannon didn’t see the earl or any of his servants, so they headed back to the farm. Ian bid her farewell at the gate of the family farm and went his own way.

“I must finish my chores,” he said.

Before Shannon had reached the front stoop, her father rushed out the door to meet her. “Shannon.” He seemed relieved to see her. “I thank the Lord that you are home.”

Shannon halted. Tears moistened the edges of her father’s dark eyes. He’d never looked so grave. Something was terribly wrong.

“Your mother was so worried about you, Rachel Shannon, after you ran away like you did. Now, she—she—”

“What is wrong, Papa? What happened?”

“The baby is coming. Hurry, she is in the bedroom. She will need you now.”

Shannon raced into the house. Her mother groaned as Shannon hurried into her parents’ bedroom.

Part Four

Ian decided to visit his pastor at his home before turning in that evening. He hoped to learn Pastor Petit’s opinion as to whether or not he should accept the position Shannon mentioned—if indeed it was offered. Like Shannon’s father, his pastor, Rev. Isaac Petit, was a French Huguenot. Ian thought of him as a friend or family member—like a grandfather or a trusted uncle.

Pastor Petit and his wife settled in Scotland years before Ian was born. A widower now, the gentleman was getting on in years. Yet he won Ian's respect and devotion because of his gentleness, his charitable works, and his excellent Bible teachings.

The pastor's cottage was small but well kept, and located on a road not far from the church. Ian noticed a weak light glowing through a front window as he walked up. A light rain dotted his brown jacket as he stood on the stoop and knocked.

Ian waited. His pastor was hard of hearing. He knocked again.

The door opened. Pastor Petit held a lighted candle. "Mr. Colquhoun, it is good to see you this evening. Please, come in and sit by the fire. The spring season is still fairly young, and it's damp—far too chilly for my old bones. I was about to have tea. I will pour a cup for you, and we shall have a cozy talk."

Ian and his pastor met in the church office often, but he hadn't visited his home in a long time. While the pastor went to pour the tea, Ian brushed off his shoes and stepped inside.

Oak bookcases crammed with books framed the stone fireplace in the sitting room. He was about to sit down when he noticed that an English Bible lay opened on a table by the pastor's chair. The minister gave Ian an English Bible soon after he learned that Ian hoped to one day become a man of the cloth, and Ian loved and respected the old gentleman all the more for it.

He doubted that his pastor would advise him to become an assistant to a vicar in the English church. Still, he wanted to hear what he might say regarding the matter.

Pastor Petit handed Ian a cup of warmed tea and settled onto the high-backed armchair facing him. "You are well, I hope."

"Oh, yes sir. I am well indeed."

"And your family?"

"They are well, too."

The minister smiled. "Good." He took a sip of tea, setting his cup on the small table beside the Bible. "Did you know that we are told in the Holy Scriptures to present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice? I was reading about it shortly before you came in."

"No Pastor, I did not. But it sounds reasonable, considering all the Lord has done for us."

"You are exactly right, and that scripture is found in the Book of Romans—chapter twelve and verse one." He reached for his Bible, placing it on his lap. "I had a dream a night or two ago, Mr. Colquhoun, and in it, you were asking me questions—as you and other young people in the church often do. In the dream you said that when you give your body as a living sacrifice in prayer as Scripture says to do that a troubling thought often comes to your mind. You said that when you meant to say 'I give my body as a living sacrifice,' the words 'I give my body to be burned' comes to your mind instead."

"Yes, I've had troubling dreams like that." Ian leaned forward slightly in his chair. "How did you know?"

"I didn't."

"So what is the meaning of your dream, sir?" Ian asked.

"Only God knows the meaning of dreams. But if we wish to pray or do as God tells us to do and something like a voice or voices tells us to say or do something contrary

to the Scriptures, we must assume that the devil is attempting to somehow hinder our Christian walk.”

A shiver shot through him. “You mean Satan?”

“Yes. But don’t take my word for it. I could be wrong. Read the Bible for yourself.”

Ian gazed down at his cup without saying anything more. His pastor was a true man of God, and he’d given Ian something new and different to think about. But it might take time before the words took root in his mind. Pastor Petit had presented him with many deep teachings in the last year or so—teachings he’d never had the time to mediate on as he should. If he decided to go to England with Shannon and the earl, he would have many hours to think on these things during the long journey to the earl’s estate.

“Thank you for that teaching, sir. You can be sure that I will think on your words again.” Ian took a sip of tea, wondering if he should jump in with questions of his own or allow the minister to say more on the current topic. He’d allowed the old gentleman to control the conversation. Was it time to explain the reason for his visit?

After a moment, Ian said, “You know, Pastor, that I felt called to go into the ministry years before I told my family. And I wanted you to be the first to know that I might soon have the opportunity to travel to England and become the assistant to a minister there.”

“What a wonderful opportunity for a young man like you, Mr. Colquhoun. Going to England will not only broaden your horizons, it will help you develop as a man of God. What is the name of the clergy you will be working under? It is possible I might have heard of him.”

“I doubt you would have.” Ian hesitated, sending up a quick prayer for the courage to continue. “You see, if I choose to take this assignment, I will be serving under a vicar in the British church.”

“The British church? I am indeed surprised. How did this come to be? And you a loyal Scotsman.”

“Miss Shannon Aimee hopes to pay a visit to the home of the Earl of Northon—well chaperoned of course, but I dare not trust the earl. Miss Aimee told of the possible opportunity for me to become the assistant to the earl’s confessor, and I—”

“Say no more. I think I understand your motive here.” The pastor lifted his cup to his lips and took a sip of tea. “You wish to protect Miss Aimee from what could be a dangerous situation.”

“That is my hope. Otherwise, I would never consider traveling all the way to Gatehaven.”

The pastor’s eyes widened. “Gatehaven, did you say?”

“Yes. That is the name of the earl’s estate.”

The pastor grew pale. Before Ian could make a comment, the old man pulled a white cloth from the belt of his dark clothing and wiped his brow.

Ian rushed to his side. “Are you all right, sir?”

“I will be. Give me a moment.”

Ian reached for his tea, pressing it to the pastor’s lips. “Here, sir, drink this.”

Pastor Petit swallowed a mouthful of tea. Then he closed his eyes and pressed his head against the back of his chair.

“Should I go for a physician?”

“No. I am not ill. Merely surprised.” The pastor opened his eyes. “But this is all so peculiar.”

“Peculiar? How is that so, sir?”

The pastor’s smile looked weak. “Sometimes the Lord answers prayer in unusual ways.” He shook his head as if he couldn’t believe what he’d just heard. “My cousin was murdered in England some years ago.”

“Murdered?”

“Yes. Her name was Magdalena Petit, and she was thirty-five years of age when she died. It was tragic for my late wife and me because Magdalena was always very special to us. We never had any children of our own, and when Magdalena’s parents died, she lived with us for several years. Magdalena was also a Huguenot, and during her eighteenth year, she moved back to England to live with an older sister. However, we corresponded often. My wife and I were devastated to learn of her death—doubly so because her murderer was never found.”

“Sure and that is a tragedy, Pastor Petit.”

“Indeed. I’d been praying that the person who killed Magdalena would come to justice. Three years ago, I started corresponding with a vicar in England whose parish is near Gatehaven—the very estate you mentioned. I think the vicar there might know more about my cousin’s death than he is willing to say in a letter. Perhaps he fears the letter might fall into unfriendly hands. The vicar has suggested several times that I journey to England and pay him a visit so we can discuss this crime face-to-face. However, I cannot leave my flock here in Scotland. I will soon leave the village for good and retire to the country in my old age. However, you could go as my ambassador, Mr. Colquhoun, if the position is offered to you and you go to England partly on my behalf.”

“I am not a member of the Church in England, sir,” Ian explained. “As you well know, I am a member of the Reformed Church. Of what benefit would becoming the assistant to an English vicar be to me?”

The pastor leaned forward. Ian noted that a bit of color had returned to his cheeks.

“Much good could come of this, Mr. Colquhoun. Not only would you be protecting a young woman’s honor, you might also bring a criminal to justice, and you should gain much from working under my friend, the vicar. He is a true man of God, and he reads his Bible daily.” The pastor motioned toward a desk by the door leading to the other room. “I have received many letters since the vicar penned a letter to me the first time, and I have kept them all. I keep them in the drawer of my desk, and I want you to have them.”

“I cannot take your letters, sir.”

“It would be a gift to you from me and my late cousin.”

“But I am not sure I will be given the position in England that I mentioned.”

“Take the letters and read them even if you are not selected. I beg you. You will please an old man if you do.”

Ian opened the drawer that his pastor mentioned and found a stack of letters tied with a black ribbon and arranged by date. He felt a little uncomfortable taking them to his house and reading them, but at the same time, the idea intrigued him.

That night, Ian opened the first one.

Dear Pastor Petit,

My name is Mr. E.G. Steen, and I am a vicar serving at a parish in England near Gatehaven—an estate owned by the Earl of Northon. While on holiday in London recently, I met the son of another English earl at a church, and he told me about a terrible injustice. He said that a Frenchwoman living in England by the name of Magdalena Petit was murdered twenty years ago. Her house was burned to the ground, and her murderer was never found.

After I returned home, I could not forget what the gentleman told me—as if it had been nailed to my mind. A few days after that, I read a list of pastors living in Scotland in a post I received from a friend from another village. When I read your name on that list I thought of Magdalena Petit. I cannot help but wonder if you might be related to her.

It would be advantageous to both of us if we could discuss this mystery in more detail. But in any case, I hope to hear from you soon.

Respectfully,

E.G. Steen, Rector
Saint Thomas Church
Fairs, England

Seated at his father's desk in the small sitting room of his family home, Ian put the letter back on the stack. To think that God might use him to help bring a murderer to justice was more than he ever thought possible. He would need to pray now and read the Bible to learn God's will for his life. It seemed incredible that the Lord might use him in this way. And Shannon could be in great danger. Regardless of her feelings for the earl, the fact that he might also be able to protect her made going to England sound very appealing.

Part Five

A frosty spring followed the winter the earl arrived in Scotland, and spring melted into early summer. Shannon spent her days and many nights helping her mother with the new baby—rarely seeing the earl except at church on Sunday mornings. He must have stayed away because he knew how her parents felt about him. Yet his loyalty to Shannon made her love him all the more, and he never failed to mention their approaching marriage each time they met.

But now it was mid-June. The arrangements for her journey to England were completed. Shannon sat by a window in the sitting room owned by Ian's parents, gazing out at the Loch. All that was left to do was say good-bye to her friends and loved ones.

On the morrow, she would be leaving for England, and though she still dreamed of going there, leaving those she loved made a part of her feel sad. Somehow, looking out at the Loch gave her the strength she needed to say good-bye to her best friend—Kate Colquhoun.

Kate leaned toward her. "Do you truly love the earl that much?"

Shannon heard a creaking sound nearby. "What was that?"

“Maybe it was the wind.” Kate shrugged. “It is often windy here—probably because we live so near the Loch.” She paused briefly. “You have yet to answer my question.”

Seated on the settee with Kate beside her, Shannon whispered her reply in case Kate’s younger sisters happened to be within earshot. She had heard something, and she didn’t think it was the wind.

The younger Colquhoun girls often listened to conversations while hidden from view, and when she first came in, Shannon had thought she heard the creak of a wooden floor plank near where they sat now.

“Do you love the earl, Shannon, or not?”

Shannon blinked and nodded. “I love him as much as you love my brother, Peter. Maybe more.”

“Well, if you are sure, that is all I really wanted to know.” Kate smiled. “I want you to be happy. You are my oldest and dearest friend. I only want the best for you.”

“Kate, I love you, too. You know that. I just hope my brother is the man you really want to spend the rest of your life with. He can be a little—”

“I know you and Peter have never gotten along,” Kate said softly. “But I love him and always will.”

“Then I am happy for you and glad that one day you will be my sister.”

“I am honored to be your future sister as well as Peter’s wife.”

Shannon released a deep breath. “I wish I could stay longer, but I must go.” She got up and glanced toward the door. “I promised to help Mama bathe my baby brother before she puts him down for his afternoon nap. Besides, I have last minute packing to do.”

Kate smiled as she got up and stood beside Shannon.

“How is the baby doing?”

“Thriving. I think he’s going to be as tall as Peter. Maybe even as tall as Ian.” Shannon reached out and embraced her friend. “I’m going to miss you, Kate Colquhoun.”

“As I will miss you and Ian. Please, Shannon, promise to write often. I know Ian will not, and I want to keep informed on the doings of my brother and my best friend.”

Their good-bye was an emotional one—at least for Shannon. Afraid she might break down and weep if she said more, Shannon reached out and hugged Kate again.

#

Ian was the one who had been standing in the shadows listening, but he never meant to do it. He’d come in the back way about the time Shannon entered through the front door of the cottage.

He’d read all of Pastor Petit’s letters and longed to share them with Shannon, but she was too devoted to the earl to listen to his concerns. He also had news for Kate.

He hadn’t counted on Shannon coming over to visit his sister, and he hadn’t wanted to spoil their emotional farewell. However, he was tired of standing there, waiting. If Shannon hadn’t left when she did, he would have made himself known to them.

Peter was on his way over to speak to Kate. It was important that Shannon not know what Peter had to say.

Kate shut the door and crossed to the archway leading to the dining room. Ian stepped out from behind a large china cabinet and stood in her path.

“Well, Ian. How long have you been here?”

“Long enough. I came in to tell you that Peter is on his way over.”

Kate smiled. “Peter is coming here?”

“Yes.”

Kate pushed back a lock of her curly brown hair that had fallen across her forehead. “What is this all about, Ian?”

“That is what I planned to tell you. But when I saw that Shannon was here, I decided to wait until she left. I did not wish to interrupt your conversation, and if I had moved an inch, you would have known I was here.”

“And all this time I thought our little sisters were the eavesdroppers in the family.”

“I’m sorry, but it was necessary.” He motioned toward the settee in the sitting room where Kate and Shannon were seated earlier. “Let us sit down, and I will explain.”

Kate sat down stiffly, her arms across her chest. “Now, what is this all about?”

“Peter’s parents do not feel comfortable having Shannon go to England with a group of strangers. They were pleased that I took the mentoring position Shannon mentioned and that I will be going to England. But they want a member of their family to go along as well. Therefore, Peter is also going.”

“My Peter is going to England, and he never told me. I do not believe it.”

“It is true, Kate. Peter will be here shortly to tell you himself.”

“If Peter was going to England, Shannon would have told me.”

“Shannon doesn’t know.”

“You mean his own sister was never told?”

“Her parents thought it best that she not know, and you must promise not to tell her.”

“We share everything. Of course I will tell her.”

“Peter and I believe that the earl is not the noble soul Shannon thinks he is, but we have no proof of that. Therefore, Peter will be trailing us to England—staying at inns near the earl’s estate but out of sight. He will also be seeking temporary employment there, and together, we will continue our investigation of the earl Shannon is so fond of.”

“Shannon is in love with the earl, Ian,” Kate said softly. “You must face that truth before you are hurt more than you already are.”

“I know she thinks she is in love with him. As our pastor would say, we will see how she feels once the scales are removed from her eyes.”

#

Early the next morning, Ian climbed in the second carriage behind the one that Shannon, the chaperone, and the earl would be riding in. The earl’s valet and Miss Foster’s maid sat stiffly, facing each other on the opposite side of the carriage.

The three of them met briefly a week ago, so there was no need for introductions. Ian greeted them cordially, sitting down beside Dickson, the valet, but close to the window. Dickson and Polly, the maid, were about Ian’s age.

Polly looked scared to death until she and Dickson realized they came from the same village not far from Luss and that they knew each other as children. All at once the two of them were chattering between themselves like a couple of crows on a fencepost. But Ian probably wouldn’t have known them when he was a child even if they were from Luss.

He'd attended a school for rich young gentleman in England when he was a boy—except he wasn't rich or English. Ian's father was the second son of the Laird of the village, meaning his uncle got the title, the family home, and all monies the family had. Ian's father got nothing. Perhaps Uncle George paid for Ian's schooling in England to mute a guilty conscious.

Ian had several conferences with his pastor since the one he had on the day Shannon told him of her plans to marry the earl. In each meeting he learned something new about the Bible he'd never known previously. But some of the things they discussed were about the dark forces of this world and how to combat them. His chores on the farm and other family duties kept his mind and body occupied, and the long journey ahead would give him time to think on the things he'd learned and how to apply them in his daily life.

For now, he would sit here and wait. Shannon and her chaperone would be arriving soon, and he hoped to watch as she and the earl entered the head carriage in front of them.

#

At daybreak on that same morning—before the cock crowed—Peter Aimee had mounted his brown-colored horse and galloped to the edge of the village. He hid behind an abandoned mill and watched as his younger sister climbed into the carriage with the Earl of Northon and his maiden aunt, Miss Foster.

Their little brother, Andre, was born on the day Shannon told Mama and Papa that she wanted to go to England. Later that same day, as Shannon helped their mother with the baby, Peter sat with his father in the sitting room of their small cottage.

“Your sister is a strong-willed young woman, Peter, just like your mama was at her age, and that can be a good thing. It can also be dangerous. I know my daughter. We will not be able to talk Shannon out of going to England to meet the earl's family—no matter how hard we might try. She will run away if we refuse to give our permission, and we will lose her forever. Therefore, your mother and I devised a plan. We want you to follow your sister to England without being noticed. And you must promise not to tell anyone of our plan—even Kate. You will eat in out-of-the-way places—sleep on the ground in mild weather. I have a little money saved which I will give you to pay for your keep until you find employment.”

“No, Papa, I cannot take your money. You planned to use it to pay for passage to the land across the sea and to buy a farm once we arrive.”

“We will worry about money for boat passages and a farm when the time comes. Now we must protect your sister from a dangerous young earl who thinks she is as beautiful as her mother.”

Peter had no intentions of spending all of his father's hard-earned money. He would take any job he could get once he reached the village near the earl's estate in England.

At the time he made that decision, he'd thought he would be the only one going to England other than those in the earl's party and the only one with Shannon's best interest at heart. But after his friend Ian accepted the position Shannon found for him, Peter realized that he would have a comrade in his quest to protect his sister from the British earl.

Still, he regretted having to say good-bye to Kate.

They had walked down to the Loch. Kate wore a blue dress that matched her eyes. A summer breeze whipped her long brown hair in all directions, and he'd kissed her before he told her he was leaving. But she already knew.

"It's all right, Dear One," she had said. "Go. I love your sister, too. And I will be waiting here at the Loch when you return."

If he hadn't already planned to make her his wife, he would have known Kate was the one when she said those words.

Part Six

Shannon already missed Andre, her baby brother, and they had only been gone a little over an hour. Andre had looked a bit small for a newborn on the day he was born, and Shannon was the first to hold him. Ever since, she'd felt guilty that she might have caused the baby to arrive too soon. Nevertheless, Andre thrived on his mother's breast milk, and Mama predicted that one day Andre would be as tall as his father and his brother, Peter—and as handsome, too.

At least Ian finally agreed to study under the vicar at Saint Thomas Church. He was traveling with them, which made leaving home for the first time easier.

Shannon still didn't know why her mother was so afraid for her to go to England. The English were certainly different from the French and the Scots, but not that different.

The middle-aged spinster, Miss Foster, had been living in the family's hunting lodge in Scotland since her parents moved there when she was a child. Miss Foster claimed to enjoy visiting the earl's family in England and said she could hardly wait to get there.

Shannon confessed to Miss Foster in whispers that she loved the earl. However, he hadn't said much to Shannon or to his aunt since they left her village. He hadn't seemed especially interested in the few comments Shannon made during the long ride in his expensive-looking carriage.

Like the earl, Ian never talked much. However, he was always willing to listen. Shannon was glad that Ian and Polly, Miss Foster's maid, and Dickson, the earl's valet, were traveling in the carriage right behind them and that she would be seeing Ian often once they arrived in England.

Nevertheless, she missed hearing the sound of the earl's deep baritone voice. Maybe he kept quiet because he would rather that Miss Foster not hear what he had to say. Still, he looked at Shannon longingly now and again. For the present, she would have to settle for that.

She'd hoped to discuss marriage plans with the man she loved during the long trip. But his aunt kept discussing other topics—dark, disturbing ones—that would probably cause Shannon to have bad dreams at the end of her first day of traveling.

Stranger still, her father had made an odd comment shortly before she climbed up in the carriage beside her chaperone.

He'd hugged her real close and said, "Do you know the meaning of the word wiles, Rachel Shannon?"

"Wiles? No, Papa, I do not."

“I was told it means beguiled. Your brother thinks the earl has beguiled you.” Her father handed her a sheet of parchment folded in half. “I have written a scripture from the Bible regarding this matter, and I want you to set it to memory. Will you promise to do that?”

“I will read the scripture verse, Papa.”

But she refused to promise to remember it.

“I love you.” Her father kissed her on the forehead. “Godspeed. And may the Lord go with you.”

“And go with you and Mama, too.”

She’d put the parchment in the sack her mother had fashioned to match the gold material in her dress. She loosened the gold string and pulled out the message, written at her father’s desk with pen and ink.

Put on the whole armor of God, she read, that you may stand against the wiles of the devil. Book of Ephesians, chapter six and verse eleven.

Shannon shook her head. The message held no meaning for her. How could someone put on the whole armor of God? Where would she find such a garment? The earl had told her of metal clothing that men once wore into battle and that he kept such an item of clothing at his hunting lodge. He’d urged her to come to his hunting lodge and see it for herself, but she never had.

She folded the parchment and put it back in her carrying sack.

They traveled through what appeared to be a hilly wilderness where trees were seldom seen. Everything she saw looked new and fresh. Shannon couldn’t get enough of merely gazing out the windows on first one side of the carriage and then the other.

But she missed Ian and looked forward to visiting with him when they stopped for the night. He knew a lot about the Bible. Maybe he would tell her the meaning of the scripture verse.

Miss Foster began a discourse on the merits of owning a crystal ball and the insights she’d gain from hers. Shannon hadn’t known what a crystal ball was or its use until her chaperone volunteered to tell her. However, the explanation sounded odd to say the least, and a bit unsettling. Shannon turned her thoughts to a different kind of ball—the ball in Luss held on the day she met the earl for the first time.

She was standing with her father and mother, waiting for Ian Colquhoun to claim his dance. However, she’d thought of nothing but the handsome Earl of Northon since he entered the hall. She found herself dreaming of meeting him, but at first, he neither sought her out nor glanced in her direction.

The young earl appeared to be searching for someone. Obviously, Shannon wasn’t that person.

All at once he walked right in front of them.

Shannon sucked in her breath.

He wore a long, black coat over the finest white shirt and dark breeches she’d ever seen. What looked like a diamond glittered from his frothy cravat.

“Rachel Shannon,” her father said.

“Yes, Papa.”

The earl had started to walk off, but he turned and looked right at her.

“We will be leaving the ball soon,” her father added in French. “Dance with Ian once. And then we will go.”

Shannon's eyes seemed to connect with the young earl's sky blue ones, and his with hers. He looked at her as if she was the only woman in the room, and then he disappeared into the crowd. She never expected to see him again, and when Ian returned to collect his dance, she gladly accepted.

"This will be my last dance of the evening," Shannon explained as Ian escorted her back to her parents. "Papa said we would be going home now."

But as soon as Ian walked away, the earl and Laird Colquhoun, the leader of the Clan, walked up and joined them. Laird Colquhoun introduced Shannon and her parents to the earl, and he managed to convince Shannon's father that it was much too early to consider leaving the ball.

All eyes turned to Shannon Aimee when the earl led her out for a country dance. Their eyes probably opened even wider when he asked her to be his partner a second time.

"I wish to dance every dance with you," he whispered in a breathy tone.

"But this is the second time you called me out, my lord. It would be unthinkable for us to dance again."

His wide grin warmed her heart. "I know a bench where we can sit and talk. I am eager to learn all about you, and the bench is very private, indeed. Nobody will be able to hear us. Yet your parents can watch us from afar—as you would expect them to do."

Shannon never expected her father to agree to such an arrangement. However, Laird Colquhoun convinced him to accept. And her father's attention never moved from that bench during the time that she and the earl sat there talking.

"Miss Aimee," Miss Foster said, cutting in on her recollections. "Are you enjoying your journey thus far?"

"Oh yes, ma'am—very much so." Shannon returned her chaperone's brief smile and gazed at the earl, hoping he would make some sort of comment. When he glanced her way, she continued. "Lord Northon, where will we be spending the night?"

"At an inn your father mentioned. But on the morrow, we will stay at an inn near a chapel I would like for us to visit. I am sure you will find it as interesting as I do."

"Then we will be attending church?"

"Church?" He laughed. "I said we will be visiting a chapel—not attending services there."

Shannon turned her head at an angle. "If we will be visiting a chapel, why not attend services? I am sure my parents would like that very much."

"I would not," he retorted. "We will tour the building—inspect the carvings and other objects of interest there—and then we will leave. I will take you and my aunt back to the inn, and I will attend an important meeting with friends from the village."

Shannon nodded. "I see."

But she didn't.

The earl had seemed so aloof since they left Luss—almost as if he was a different person. It had to be because Miss Foster hung on their every word. Things would return to normal once they arrived at his estate.

Shannon had thought—hoped—that she would be having her supper that evening with the earl. She'd dreamed that they would share a table for two—that he would whisper sweet love words as he had done in Luss. But that did not happen.

The earl left the inn as soon as they checked in.

Later, Shannon sat at a table below stairs long after Miss Foster turned in for the night, hoping the earl would return. Ian sat with her.

“To keep you from being lonely,” Ian said.

During the long evening, Shannon told Ian of the message with the scripture verse in it and asked if he knew its meaning. He confessed that he did not.

Then Ian reminded her of their happy childhood in Luss and told a funny story or two—perhaps to cheer her up. Soon she felt a lot better, and when she actually laughed at some of his remarks, she realized that a merry heart really was like a medicine.

#

Peter Aimee stood just outside the circle of light coming from lamps—lamps that hung from a tree and from the eaves of the Lion’s Inn. His sister, Shannon, as well as the earl and his party were staying the night at the inn. Peter would be sleeping in a field nearby on a blanket he’d brought from home.

He’d followed the earl after he left the inn to another establishment further on where he heard loud music coming from inside. He peeked in a window and saw a lot of men drinking from large mugs. The earl was one of them. And young women showed their ankles as they danced on a lighted stage.

Peter saw enough to know that the earl was up to no good. He’d mounted his brown horse and headed back to the inn. He wanted to check the time when the earl returned and the condition he was in when he staggered inside.

The entry door to the inn opened. Ian Colquhoun stepped onto the stoop out front.

“Ian,” Peter said from the darkness. “I’m over here.”

“Peter?”

“Yes. Over here.”

Peter watched as Ian moved toward him.

“It’s awfully dark out here, my friend,” Ian said, “and the dim light coming from the inn helps but a little. Will you join me at a table inside? You must be starving.”

“True, I am hungry. But it’s too risky for me to be seen at an inn where my sister is sleeping. She would be furious if she knew I followed her here. I have no wish that the earl find me here either.”

“Shannon was very tired and went up to bed.” Ian shrugged. “I cannot say where the earl might be.”

“I can. I followed him, and the earl went out for a night of drinking. I doubt he will return until the early hours of the morning.”

“Then I see no reason why you cannot come inside.” Ian motioned toward a path at the side of inn. “There is a back door to the eating area. Go around to the back, knock, and I will open the door. We will take a table near the door. And while we talk, you can eat your supper.”

Peter nodded. “I might regret this, but I am too tired and hungry to argue. I will knock on the back door shortly.”

“And I will open it as soon as you do.”

#

Ian went back inside.

The plump, middle-aged woman who had served their supper stood just inside the door. She sent him a toothless smile.

“Lass,” Ian said as if he thought he was talking to a much younger woman, “please send someone to the table in the back a bit later. I will be likin’ to eat another bowl of stew.”

The woman laughed. “Eatin’ again, are ya?”

He nodded and grinned.

“You’re a handsome, lad, you know. But if you keep eating two suppers a night, you’ll soon be lookin’ like me husband.” She motioned toward the rotund little man with the bald head standing behind the counter.

Ian couldn’t keep from laughing. “Wait a few minutes before bringing my order. As I said, I’ll be hungrier by then.”

The woman’s loud giggle echoed all around him as Ian hurried to the back of the eating area. After a moment, he heard a knock and opened the door.

“Come in while nobody is watching.” Ian motioned to the table nearest the door. “We will sit there.”

Ian pulled out a chair and sat down. Then Peter did.

“The mutton stew is good here.” Ian grinned. “In fact, it is the only meal they serve.”

“Then I feel sure I will be having stew.”

They both laughed.

“We will not be traveling all the way to Edinburgh on the morrow as I would have thought,” Ian said. “We will only be going as far as the village of Rosslyn. The wife of the innkeeper here is a talker, and she told me a little about strange doings in that village.”

“Strange doings?” Peter leaned forward in his chair. “I am eager to hear what she said.”

“Well, the innkeeper’s wife claims that Rosslyn is known as a place where the wee people live—as well as ghosts and goblins. And she says that she knows for a fact that a Black Mass was held there once.”

“A Black Mass, did you say?”

“You heard right.”

Peter’s forehead wrinkled. “So why would the earl be stopping there on his way to England?”

Ian shrugged. “I have not one idea in my mind.”

“I will travel to Rosslyn before ya—if I can,” Peter said. “I want to find out what business the earl might have in Rosslyn and more about the village. I don’t believe in the existence of fairies and the like, but the Black Mass concerns me. I have heard of odd happenings around here, and I want to know more about all of this.”

That night before blowing out the light in his room, Ian read his pastor’s second letter again—the one from the vicar in England.

Dear Pastor Petit,

I was delighted to hear from you. However, I was sorry to learn that you are related to the murdered woman. Please accept my belated condolences. Most of what I know is hearsay, and as men of God, we cannot condemn a person to prison without two witnesses. I have none. Here are the facts I do know to be true.

The murder of your cousin, Magdalena Petit, took place in the English village of Cert. A well-dressed Frenchman, a man in the clothes of a monk, and two or three other men spent the night of the murder at an inn in the village.

A young barmaid employed at the inn told the innkeeper that the handsome young Frenchman she found so interesting said he was born in England of French parents. However, the monk told someone else in the village that they had only recently arrived in England from France. Another witness stated that he saw a monk and two other men walking away from the area where Magdalena lived after the fire started, but nobody saw who started the fire or who killed Miss Petit.

The next morning after the murder, the Frenchman and the other strangers moved on. They were never seen again.

You said in your letter that your late cousin was a French Protestant or what you would call a Huguenot. Could that have been the motive for your cousin's death? Or was it perhaps for reasons unrelated to religion?

Some in my parish are telling tales of witchcraft in our midst and of young girls disappearing and never being seen again. I am sure it is merely idle talk started by gossips with little to keep them busy at home. Still, I do wonder. Do some members of your congregation report such mischief as well? Or is this unique to my parish?

Ian shook his head, folding the letter in half. He'd tried to convince Shannon's parents not to let her go to England. But after they met Miss Foster, they gave their permission.

Apparently, the earl's aunt made a good first impression. Ian could only hope Shannon's parents were right about the woman, but he had doubts. He put the letter with the others and tried not to think about the missing young women the vicar mentioned.

Each time he read one of the letters, he became more convinced that he was a part of an important mission. The letters were keys that fit unknown locks. Doors needed to be opened if he hoped to save Shannon and find a murderer. Somehow, he knew he must act as a watchman on the wall until his mission was complete—no matter how long it took.

For now, he would read and study the Bible, and then he would go to sleep.