

Kingdom of Shadows



Barbara Erskine

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DEDICATION

For
Adrian James Earl
and
Jonathan Erskine Alexander
also descendants of the Bruce

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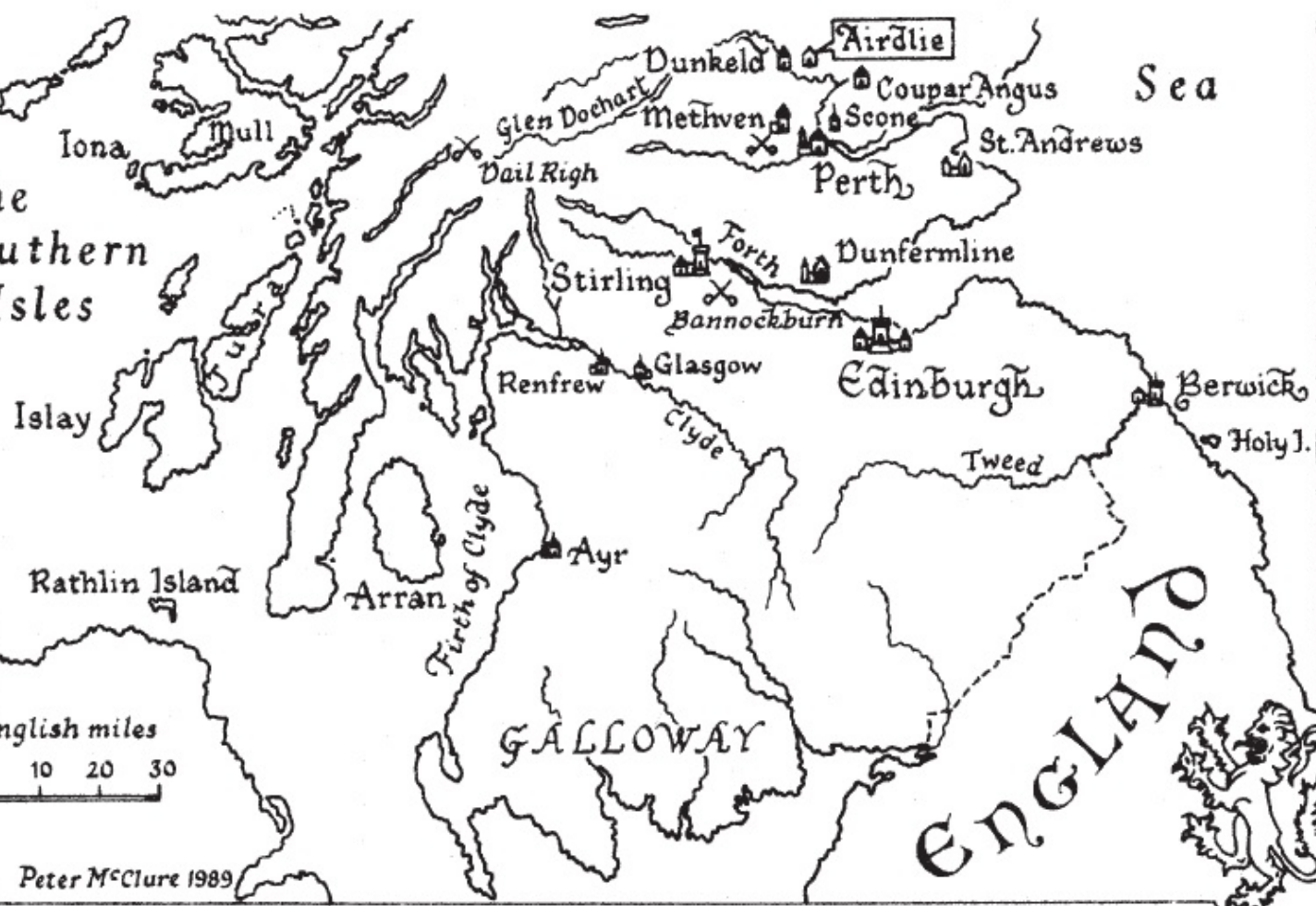
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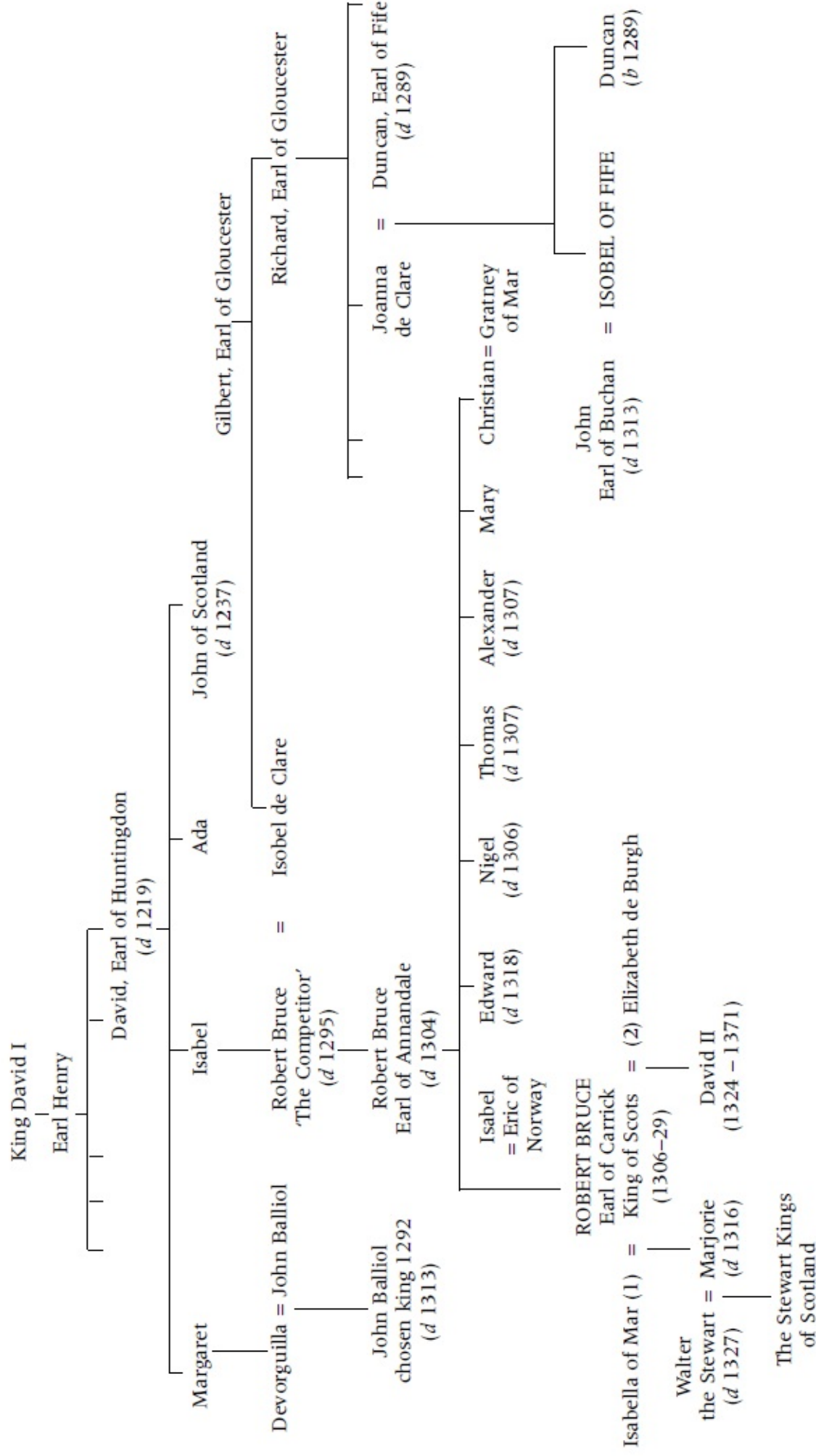


English miles
0 10 20 30

Peter McClure 1989

THE SCOTTISH SUCCESSION

with the immediate families of Robert Bruce and Isobel of Fife



THE DREAM

It came again that night with the silent menace of a cloud sliding across the moon. In her sleep her hands began to clench and unclench, slippery with sweat. Her breathing became short and irregular, her heartbeat increased and she threw herself from side to side, moaning with fear. Then she ceased to move. Beneath her eyelids her eyes began to flick rapidly about.

Panic-stricken she fought to escape, her hands groping in the darkness whilst something held her back, trapping her, holding her immovable. There were bars above her head, behind her back, on every side of her, and, beyond the bars, eyes. Faces staring, mouths moving, teeth glittering with spittle, like the fangs of animals. Only they weren't animals: they were people and only the bars could save her from them. She cowered back now, on her knees, her arms about her head.

When she looked up, they had gone. All was empty again.

Slowly she stood up. Now in her dream she was a bird. Her wings were stiff with disuse, the feathers dusty and brittle. To spread them hurt the muscles in her breast and shoulders. She tried to beat them, faster and faster, willing them to carry her outwards and upwards towards the sky. But the bars held and the feathers beat against them – beating, beating until her wings were broken and bloody and she was exhausted. Hope died; she knew again she was a woman.

The dream began to lift and with it the immobility which comes with the deepest sleep. Tears filled her eyes and slipped from beneath her closed lids. She moved her head restlessly again, her hands groping in an echo of the dream, seeking the bars, afraid they would still be there when she awoke. She was fighting the dream now, yet still ensnared.

One hand, flailing in the darkness, caught something and held it until her knuckles whitened. It was the chained door of the cage.

As her eyes flew wide she opened her mouth and began to scream.

1970

Margaret Gordon looked down at the two children at her feet and smiled. James, his cheeks pink and shining, his hair neatly brushed and his checked shirt and jeans clean for once, was sitting fidgeting on the footstool, near her chair. At eight, he was already a tall, athletic boy, promising to be as handsome as his father. She shook her head sadly, then she turned her attention to Clare. Four years older than her brother she was a dark-haired, slim child, with the grace and elfin beauty of a fawn. Her short wavy hair framed a delicate face, dominated by huge grey eyes.

And the eyes as always were fixed unwaveringly on her great aunt's face.

'Go on, Aunt Margaret, let's hear the bit about the spider.' James leaned forward, elbows on knees. 'And how the king escaped from Scotland.'

Margaret smiled indulgently. 'Again?' You ask for that story every time you come to see me. How strange the way the children yearned for the same old tales to be repeated. And complained if you forgot or altered the slightest detail.

'And Clare?' She turned and smiled at her great niece. 'Which story would you like?'

As soon as the words had left her mouth she regretted them, knowing what the answer would be. She felt her stomach muscles tighten warningly as she met Clare's steady gaze.

'I'd like to hear about the Countess Isobel who crowned him king,' the girl whispered. 'And how they put her in a cage ...'

Margaret swallowed. 'That's not very cheerful, my dear. I think perhaps we should stick to the spider today, as it's nearly tea-time.' She hesitated, uncomfortable beneath those huge, expressive eyes. 'Besides, your mother and Archie will be back from their walk soon.'

Easing herself back in her chair she let out an exclamation of irritation as the two walking-sticks hooked over the wooden arm, fell to the floor with a rattle.

Clumsily James jumped to his feet to retrieve them, stepping over his sister who hadn't moved. 'Go on then, Aunt Margaret.' He wedged them firmly back into place. 'It happened on Rathlin Island ...'

Margaret looked down at her hands. The slim aristocratic fingers were thickened and knotted with arthritis now, so she could no longer wear rings, nor push a bangle over her swollen knuckles. How silly at her age to care for such vain, inconsequential things. Surreptitiously she glanced at Clare again. When the child was a little older she would give her the jewellery. For the rest Clare would have to wait until she was dead.

She gripped one of the walking-sticks tightly and rested it upright against her knees so that she could lean on it, perched on the edge of the high seat to ease the pain in her back. The child's mother said she often had nightmares. Had she already had the dream? There were dark shadows under her eyes which should not have been there in a girl her age. Margaret felt a warning shiver of apprehension. Abruptly she brought her mind back to the story. 'On Rathlin Island there was a cave and there the king and his followers hid the whole of that long, vicious winter ...'

If only Isobel had gone with him. If only he had allowed her to stay at his side as he longed. If only he had not sent her away.

The long silence stretched out as her thoughts went back over the story: the story which had

obsessed her as long as she could remember, the story she had told these two children again and again.

~~But how had she heard it herself? She couldn't remember who had told her first.~~ The story had always been with her, part of her bones, part of her soul. The joy, the pain, the love and, at the last, the fear and despair. And with it the recurring nightmare.

'Aunt Margaret?' James gave a tentative cough. 'The king ... on Rathlin ...?'

With a start she dragged her thoughts back to the present. She forced herself to smile.

'I'm sorry, James. I think I must be a little tired.' She glanced at Clare, almost afraid that the girl had read her thoughts, but Clare was no longer looking at her. Her eyes were fixed on the window, staring up at the thick mat of grey cloud which hung over Airdlie House. Her eyes were full of pain.

'Clare!'

Only the astonishment in James's face made Margaret realise how panicky her cry had sounded.

The girl jumped up. 'Yes, Aunt Margaret?' She came to stand at the old woman's side, her face full of anxiety. 'What is it?'

'Nothing, my dear, nothing.' Margaret levered herself to her feet. Her imagination was running away with her again. It was crazy to think one could unwittingly pass on an obsession. Another fear lay at the door of her over-fertile brain. The child was growing up, that was all. On the threshold of womanhood. Soon she wouldn't want to listen to an old woman's ramblings any more. She would be far more interested in boys and pop music and clothes. There would be no time then for a story so many generations old. No time at all. She would forget.

Margaret took a stick in each hand and gripped them firmly, placing the two black rubber tips squarely on the polished boards on either side of her swollen feet. 'Let's go and start making tea, shall we?' she said. 'The Bruce and his spider can come later.'

‘You know, you are being bloody unfair to Paul!’

Gillian Royland reached for the tumbler and sipped lazily at the fruit drink. She pushed her sunglasses up into her hair and peered at her sister-in-law myopically from beneath her shady hair. ‘Don’t you want children, for God’s sake?’

‘You know I do.’ Clare eyed the other woman’s hugely pregnant bulk beneath the expensively cut sundress, then she lay back on the towel and closed her eyes, one hand dangling in the pool feeling the silkiness of the water against her fingertips. They were in the garden of Clare’s country home, Bucksters.

‘Then why won’t you have some tests to find out what’s wrong?’

Clare sighed. ‘Paul and I have both been to Dr Stanford.’

‘Oh yes, a chat with your GP.’ Gillian heaved herself up higher on the cushioned chair. ‘What does he know about it? I told you, you must go and see my gynaecologist in Harley Street.’

‘There is nothing wrong with me, Gill.’ Clare clenched her fist in the water, unwilling to talk about the questions, the tests, the humiliations she and Paul had already faced. ‘John Stanford said I should learn to relax a bit more, that’s all.’

‘And you respond by going to this crazy guru!’

‘He’s not a guru!’ Clare sat up impatiently, shaking her wet hair back from her face. ‘He teaches yoga. Millions of people study yoga. There is nothing wrong about it. You should try it. Yes, even in your condition!’

‘Hey, keep calm.’ Gillian hastily dropped the glasses on her nose, retreating at once from the threat of an argument. She eyed her tempestuous sister-in-law wryly. ‘You certainly need to learn how to relax.’ When Clare didn’t respond, she went on tentatively, feeling more secure behind the glasses. ‘Everything is all right between you and Paul?’

The question hung for a moment between them. Clare clasped her arms around her knees, her shoulders hunched as a breath of cold touched them. A few leaves drifted down from the beech hedge into the still blue water. ‘Why shouldn’t it be?’ she said at last.

Gillian watched her covertly. ‘No reason at all. You are both coming to our party on Saturday, aren’t you?’ She changed the subject so abruptly that Clare stiffened.

‘If Paul can get away from London this weekend.’ Clare stood up suddenly with effortless grace and stood poised by the side of the pool, conscious for a moment of her sister-in-law’s critical stare. Then she dived into the water. The cold was biting, invigorating, touched already by that frisson of autumn in the air. It was the first day of October.

By the time she pulled herself up the ladder at the far end of the pool she was shivering violently.

‘He’s still furious about your great aunt’s will, isn’t he?’ Gillian’s cool voice brought Clare up short as she stooped for her towel.

‘He told you that?’ Clare swung to face her.

‘He told David about it, in the end. But we’d guessed something was wrong. Everyone thought she would leave you and James half of her money each.’

‘It was hardly everyone’s business!’ Clare retorted.

‘Oh come on, we are family.’ Gillian began to lever herself to her feet. ‘Paul isn’t worried about money, is he, Clare?’

‘Paul?’ Clare stared at her, visibly shocked by the question. ‘What on earth makes you ask that?’

The two women eyed each other for a moment, Clare’s steady grey eyes meeting Gillian’s pale watery ones. Uncomfortably Gillian looked away. ‘Nothing. Nothing at all. He just seemed so upset about it, that’s all.’

‘He was upset for me.’ Clare rubbed her hair energetically. ‘He thought I minded.’

‘And don’t you?’

Clare shook her head. ‘I wanted Duncairn, that was all.’

She stood for a long time after Gillian had gone, gazing down at the pool as another shower of golden leaves pattered on to the water. She had minded about the money, of course. She had minded dreadfully. It would have given her her freedom.

She dried herself lazily and dropped the towel as the breeze died away again and the sun reappeared, warming her chilled skin. Running her hands slowly down her own slim, tanned body she was scowling, thinking of her sister-in-law’s swelling, fertile figure, when she noticed that behind her a woman had appeared at the gateway in the high hedge which enclosed the pool area. She waved. ‘Come on, Sarah, and have a swim whilst the sun is out,’ she called.

Sarah Collins frowned. Tall, smartly dressed, a woman in her early fifties, she wore an apron over her skirt. In her hand was a packet of letters.

‘The post came just as Lady Royland was leaving,’ she called back. ‘I thought I’d bring you over. I can’t swim now. I’ve an enormous amount to do this morning.’

Had she imagined the slight emphasis on that last pronoun, Clare wondered: the unspoken implication that Clare of course had nothing to do at all.

Clare smiled at her determinedly. ‘I’m sure things in the house can wait, Sarah. I doubt if we’ll have many more beautiful days like this, this year.’

She knew the woman wouldn’t swim. She never did. For all Clare’s determined efforts to make a friend of her, Sarah Collins seemed equally determined to keep her distance, to draw demarcation lines. Mistress and servant. Lady of the house and housekeeper. Confidante – that was a traditional part of the role – but giving nothing in exchange, so not a real friend. Ever.

Clare shrugged. She picked up the towel again and, drying her hands, she took the letters. Glancing at them without interest she threw them down on the white-painted wrought-iron table.

Already Sarah was walking back to the house. The gate clicked behind her and Clare was alone again. Sighing she poured herself some juice from the jug on the table, but she didn’t drink it. Instead she walked over to the mat on the pool’s edge. She would do twenty minutes’ yoga practice now whilst her body was clean and invigorated and relaxed from the swim.

Slipping out of the wet bikini she tossed it on to one side, sitting, gracefully naked, on the mat. Taking a deep slow breath she closed her eyes and began deliberately to relax, muscle by muscle, limb by limb, letting her mind float blankly as, slowly, she drew her legs up into the first asana.

‘Yoga, meditation, relaxation. First-class, my dear. They’re all first-class.’ She could still hear John Stanford’s slightly patronising tones. ‘Anything to help you unwind and remove the stress. No, don’t worry about it at all. The tests are going to prove there is nothing wrong. You’ll see. When nature thinks you’re good and ready you’ll conceive and not a moment before. We can’t hurry these things, you know.’

‘But don’t I have to go into hospital or anything?’ She had expected worse than those tests; a hospital appointment, talk of a D and C; something. Not a pat on the back for going to yoga classes.

He had shaken his head. ‘You’ve been on the pill for five years, Clare. It can take a while for you

fertility to return. I'm sure in my own mind that is all it is. Is Paul putting the pressure on you, m dear? Wanting a son and heir and all that? I'll have a word with him about it. Leave it to me.'

And that had been that. And meanwhile Paul's family surrounded her reproachfully with the children. Gillian with three and another on the way; Chloe, her other sister-in-law, with two; and even Em, her best friend, Paul's baby sister, had Julia.

She opened the first of her letters as she walked back towards the house, once more clad in the bikini for the sake of Sarah's susceptibilities. She was reading it as she reached the soft mossy grass of the back lawn.

We understand that you are the owner of the hotel, castle ... and policies of the area known as Duncairn ... Scotland. Our client has indicated that he would be interested in purchasing the above-mentioned property in its entirety ... negotiation of a price to be undertaken ...

Clare stared down at the letter in disbelief. A wave of anger swept over her. Did they seriously imagine she would sell Duncairn? Sell her birthright, sell seven hundred years of history, her inheritance from Aunt Margaret; sell all that beauty and wildness and memory? The letter had a official, demanding tone; the impersonal legal phrasing implied more than a casual interest, it implied knowledge of the place, and of the extent of her ownership; it implied the right to buy. Suddenly she was filled with panic.

Clutching the letters in her hand, she began to run towards the house, her bare feet silent on the oiled polished boards as she pushed open the french windows. The drawing room was cool, shaded from the sun by half-drawn curtains, and Jocasta, her long-haired golden retriever, was lying in there in the cool, asleep. The dog raised her head as Clare appeared and wagged her tail in greeting as her mistress threw the rest of the post on to a chair.

Not even pausing to read the letter again, Clare sat down at her desk, pulled a piece of headed notepaper from one of the cubby-holes in front of her and grabbed her pen.

Nothing, nothing would ever induce her to sell. No amount of money would be sufficient incentive. Her pen raced over the paper. The property was not and never would be for sale. How dare Messrs Mitchison and Archer even ask? She scratched her signature and folded it into an envelope. It was then that she realised her hands were shaking with fury.

With a loud sigh the dog lay flat again and closed her eyes. The action brought Clare up short. She stared at Casta for a moment, then slowly she tore the envelope in two. She took a deep breath. Bodily awareness, Zak called it. Be aware of your body; notice when it's under stress. Be conscious of your pulse, your heartbeat. Feel the heat in your face. Notice how you are breathing. Give yourself more oxygen. Nothing is worth that much hassle ... His cool voice came back to her. Time. Take time. She hadn't realised she was trembling, reacting to the threat as though this man, this unknown lawyer with his importunate letter was in the room with her.

Slowly she stood up. Idiot that she was. There was no hurry. The letter could be posted any time. He could do nothing. The land was not for sale. Whatever his client wanted it for, they could find it somewhere else. Nothing and no one could force her to sell ...

She thought suddenly of Paul and she found herself swallowing nervously. What would Paul say when he heard about the offer?

And with the same thought she knew with calm certainty that she would never tell him.

Upstairs she showered, then, wrapping herself in a bathrobe, went into her bedroom. It was a prettily furnished room, full of sunlight, the dust-pink curtains and frills making it warm and friendly whilst the silver

grey carpet gave an impression of cool self-possession. She could smell the roses from the silver and glass bowl on the table by the window. Meditate. That was Zak's remedy for situations she couldn't handle. Meditate, relax, take time. Then face the problem and do something about it. Then forget it.

She opened the cupboard in the corner of the room and brought out a candle in a squat cut-glass holder and some matches. Lighting it and placing it carefully on the carpet, she drew the curtains, then cross-legged she sat down before it, eyes closed, wrists hanging loosely on her knees.

Her favourite exercise wasn't really meditation. She had tried the various forms Zak had suggested, but none had the appeal of the first visualisation exercise he had taught her. 'Close your eyes and think of your favourite place. The place you feel happiest and most relaxed. Picture the scene. Make it so real that you can smell it, feel it, hear it, feel the sun on your skin, hear the birdsong, smell the grass, make a mental ashram there.' She always chose Duncairn.

It was in June she had been there last, on Midsummer's Day, just after she and Paul had had their first quarrel.

The will had been quite explicit. To Clare came the ruined castle, a thousand or so acres of moorland around it, the old-fashioned, sleepy, hotel and the feus of the fishing village which nestled at the foot of the cliffs. As she had a rich husband to support her, she had no need of money, so the three farms and the money, all of it, went to James, who was so like his dead father; as did Airdlie, the Perthshire house and estates, although their mother and her second husband, Archie, had life tenancy there.

'Did you know what the old bat planned to do?' Paul turned on her the moment they were alone in their hotel room after the reading of the will.

'No, I didn't know.' Her voice was bleak. 'She always said she would leave everything to us both. I was to get Duncairn – I've always known I'd get Duncairn – but I thought she'd leave me some money too.'

'Some money!' Paul lowered his voice. 'Margaret Gordon was worth over one and a half million. Clare, in securities alone. With the farms another three at least.' His handsome face looked drawn and pale as he caught her arm and swung her to face him. 'And she left it all to James! You will have to contest it.'

'No!'

'No?' He stared at her.

'No, Paul. I won't contest it. She's right. You're a wealthy man. My brother had nothing, nothing at all. He never even had a father. Daddy died before he was born!'

'He had Archie –'

'Archie hates us. He has always resented us for being there; he thinks of us as coming between him and Mummy – you know that as well as I do.' Clare's eyes were blazing. 'No, that money is James's by right. I have everything I want.' Abruptly her anger subsided. She put her hands on Paul's shoulders. 'Come on, darling. We don't need any more money.'

Paul caught her wrists and pushed them away. 'Everyone needs more money, Clare. Duncairn is worth *nothing*.' His voice was harsh.

For a moment she stared at him, shocked, then she turned away and walked over to the window, staring down over the rooftops at the back of the hotel towards the distant Firth of Forth. 'Well, it's worth everything to me,' she whispered. 'Everything. Don't you understand?' She spun round. 'It's been in our family for seven hundred years!'

‘Then perhaps James ought to have it as well. He is, after all, the heir to whatever pretensions your family have to gentility, not you.’ Paul’s voice was deliberately cruel.

She gasped. ‘Paul!’

‘Well, it’s true. Or are you claiming some feminist right of inheritance because you are the eldest? Perhaps it is *I* who should have taken *your* surname when we married!’ His voice was heavy with sarcasm.

‘Well, at least it’s a name to be proud of!’ she flashed back at him, not caring suddenly what she said any more. ‘After all, what are you? The third son of a family who can’t trace their ancestors back more than one generation! I never could understand why you were so anxious for an heir. He’ll have nothing to inherit from you!’

‘Apart from the wealth which everyone keeps talking about, you mean,’ said Paul. His voice was ice-cold.

Clare stared at him, furious to find herself near to tears. To conceal them she turned back to her scrutiny of the rooftops, watching with anguished intensity a gull wheeling around the distant chimney-pots. She hunched her shoulders.

‘Apart from your wealth,’ she echoed.

‘So. At least I now know what you think of me,’ he went on quietly. ‘May I enquire why you lowered yourself so far as to marry me?’

‘You know why I married you!’ She didn’t turn round. ‘I loved you.’

‘Loved, I notice. Not love.’

‘Love, then! Paul, what’s the matter? What’s wrong with you? Why are you like this?’ Pushing herself away from the windowsill, she came to stand in front of him.

He stared at her. Her pale face with the expressive grey eyes and the dark frame of her hair never failed to make him catch his breath with its frail beauty. The frailness, of course, was misleading. Clare was as tough as old boots, even if she was a bit highly strung. He noted the tears on her cheeks now and felt a sudden twinge of contrition. He hadn’t meant to hurt her.

It was just that the disappointment and the anxiety had been so intense. Dear God! how he had relied on that money. It was to have been his life-line. His only way out of the hell he had found himself in. He could feel the sweat starting out on the palms of his hands just at the thought of what had happened. Abruptly he began to peel off his jacket. ‘If we’re to meet the others in the bar before lunch we’d better get ready,’ he said abruptly, throwing it down on the bed. ‘No doubt your brother will want to buy a bottle or two of Bolly to celebrate his little windfall.’

‘Paul –’

‘No, Clare. Don’t say another word. Not another word. I think you’ve said enough.’ Pulling off his tie he threw that down too before disappearing into the bathroom and slamming the door.

Clare stared after him in silence. She could feel herself beginning to shake. She was overwhelmed by a sense of utter loneliness, as though she had found herself suddenly in the room with a stranger, a stranger of whom she had been for a moment almost afraid.

Her gaze fell on the dressing-table where earlier he had thrown his car keys. Less than a minute later she had grabbed them and, with a glance at the closed bathroom door, let herself out of the room and begun to make her way quickly down the hallway.

Dazzled by the blaze of the hot afternoon sun Clare had stared around at the castle ruins. Behind her the cooling engine of the British racing green XJS ticked quietly, pulled up on the grass at the side of the track. The cool wind carried the scent of the sea, sweetened by the dog roses which climbed the

crumbling grey walls. Slowly she walked out along the promontory towards the cliff and cautiously peered over. Perhaps a hundred years ago railings had been put up across the massive breach in the walls where the seaward stones had begun to fall down the cliffs, but now they sagged drunkenly over the gap. She looked down towards the water, grey-blue and opaque, cold, even beneath the blazing June sky, and watched the gulls circling in the air currents. All round her the sound of birds was deafening; kittiwakes on the cliffs, their cries echoing off the granite shell of the tower, the yelp of a jackdaw hidden somewhere in the crumbling walls, a blackbird high in the rowan which grew in the space between the walls where once the chapel had stood.

The castle was deserted. Well off the tourist trail, and unsignposted, only the visitors to the hotel ever came here, and there were few enough of them. She glanced over her shoulder towards the grey stone walls of the Duncairn Hotel, nestling behind the deep windbreak of birch and fir. It was making a loss, that she knew, but it would be hard, very hard, to bring herself to change things. She loved Duncairn for its solitude, with the distant low silhouette of the hills behind it. A successful hotel would end that solitude overnight.

Slowly she strolled over the grass. In the centre of the walls someone had mown it roughly, just enough to make for easy walking amongst the ruins – Jack Grant at the hotel, she supposed. She would stay the night there before driving back to Edinburgh. It would give both her and Paul time to cool off. And she couldn't face going back to Airdlie. Not now it belonged to James.

She was no longer shaking. She had expended her fury and her pain by hurtling up the motorway for over a hundred miles an hour, not looking or caring if the police were patrolling, and then on the long narrow road north. But she was still tense, still depressed after the ordeal of the formal reading of the will, knowing that she had been the only person in the room who truly and desperately mourned Margaret Gordon.

She jumped as a shadow fell across the grass near her and looked wildly round, but it was nothing – just the wind flexing and tossing the graceful branches of a birch. Slowly she began to walk round the walls every now and then reaching out to touch the warm, grey-pink stones of the castle walls as if greeting them ritually, taking possession of her inheritance. Picking her way through the thistles and rank grass and wild flowers towards the stone steps she climbed precariously up to what remained of the second floor of the old keep. The floor had half collapsed and two of the walls had gone, but one high round window on the seaward side remained intact and she made her way carefully to it, standing in the embrasure, her hands on the sun-warmed sill, looking out to sea. There was a bank of mist out over the water now, pearly in the diffused sunlight.

A man was standing watching her from about twenty feet away, leaning against the crumbling remains of the eastern tower. Instinctively she drew back into the shadow of the window arch. He must be a guest at the hotel, she supposed. She studied him covertly, noting the patched khaki sweater, the threadbare cords and the more-than-serviceable binoculars slung around his neck. He was a tall man in his mid-thirties perhaps, good-looking in the rugged Scots fashion; very fair. And he was a intrusion. She felt a wave of resentment at his presence. She needed to be alone. Angrily, she turned back and descended the steps once more, conscious that she was in full view of him. She wondered suddenly what he must make of her, still dressed for the Edinburgh solicitor in a dark blue silk dress with court shoes, scrambling over the ruins. Only her hair was appropriate now, torn from its neat style by the wind and whipped into wild tangled curls.

She expected him to retreat as she walked near him, but he didn't move. Folding his arms, he leaned comfortably against the wall, and she thought she saw a flash of grim humour in his eyes as she walked past him, her heels catching in the grass and stones, before he turned away.

It was as she was making her way slowly back across the high bank of turf which covered one of the collapsed walls that she felt it. Suddenly, from nowhere, a wave of grief and despair swept over her, so tangible that it stopped her in her tracks. She shivered violently, staring round. It was as if the mood came from outside herself, an atmosphere borne in on the cold wind. Behind her, the banks of mist had drawn closer and the haar was beginning to come in off the sea, drifting soundlessly up the huge granite cliffs, lapping amongst the fissures in the stone. Even the birds had fallen silent.

She found she was holding her breath, her fists clenched so tightly she could feel the slippery perspiration on her palms, and she glanced up at the sun. Moments before it had been shining hot and down out of a blue sky. Now it was a cold white disc, shrugging into the mist banks and out of sight.

For no reason she was suddenly afraid.

In spite of herself she glanced back over her shoulder towards the stranger, seeking the comfort of another human presence. He was standing now beneath the rowan tree, staring up at the broken arch of the high window which had once dominated the chapel. And, without even seeing his face, she knew that he too had felt something of the cold shadow which had crossed the castle.

Lost in her meditation Clare frowned, guiding her mind back into the sunlight as she had been taught when driving away the North Sea haar which had cast its cold fingers over Duncairn, driving away the despair and fear which had persisted until she retraced her steps to the car and drove on to the hotel. She had not seen the stranger again.

Sarah Collins was in the kitchen polishing the silver when the phone rang. She waited meticulously for four rings, to see if Clare was going to answer it upstairs, then she picked up the receiver.

‘Hello, Mrs C. It’s Emma Cassidy. Is Clare around?’

Sarah frowned. She resented deeply being addressed by anything other than her proper name. ‘I don’t believe she’s upstairs, Mrs Cassidy. If you wish, I’ll call her.’ She didn’t wait for a reply. Dropping the receiver on the work top with a rattle designed to illustrate her irritation, she began to walk slowly towards the stairs.

The door of the master bedroom was shut. Sarah listened for a moment, her ear almost against the wood panelling, then very gently, she knocked.

There was no reply. She pursed her lips slightly and was about to turn away when on impulse she gripped the handle and twisted it quietly until with a click the latch slid back and the door opened. Clare was still seated on the floor, her legs crossed, her hands resting loosely on her knees. Her eyes were shut. Sarah watched in horrified fascination, noting the candle, the wax dripping slightly on the side away from the gently blowing curtains, the pale ice-green bathrobe slipping so that it revealed one long tanned thigh and most of Clare’s left breast. Her breathing was deep and completely regular, her body relaxed, her face a picture of calm serenity. Sarah shivered. It might be an Indian summer in the garden, but in this shaded bedroom, it was suddenly very, very cold.

Turning, Sarah almost ran from the room, pulling the door closed silently behind her, then she hurried back down to the kitchen. Her hands were shaking as she grabbed the phone. ‘I’m sorry, Mrs Cassidy, but I can’t find her. She must be outside somewhere. Shall I get her to call you back later?’

She did not wait for Emma to ring off. Slamming down the receiver, she took a deep breath, then picking it up again, she began to dial.

She was put straight through to Paul’s office. Gripping the receiver tightly in her left hand she glanced nervously towards the kitchen door. ‘She’s doing it again,’ she whispered into the telephone mouthpiece. ‘Now, this minute. The candle and everything.’

‘It’s good of you to ring, Mrs Collins.’ At his desk in the dark oak-panelled room, Paul stood up slowly. ‘But I don’t think there is any cause for alarm. I gather contemplation of a lighted candle is a well-known meditation technique.’

Sarah took another deep breath, clearly audible down the phone. ‘I think it is more than meditation,’ she said darkly. ‘I’ve seen meditation on TV and when that dreadful man Zachary came over here to give her those lessons, what he showed her was quite different. What Mrs Royland is doing is wrong. It’s very, very wrong.’

Paul leaned against his desk wearily. ‘In what way wrong, Mrs Collins?’

She bit her lip, rubbing her fingers distractedly through the iron set of her hair. ‘It’s just *wrong*,’ she repeated stubbornly. ‘You must stop her doing it, Mr Royland.’

‘I doubt if I could do that.’ She heard with surprise the bitterness in his wry laugh. ‘I doubt if I could stop Clare doing anything she really wanted to.’

He hung up and stood looking down at the telephone for several minutes, without seeing it. Then he threw himself down once more into the deeply-buttoned leather desk-chair, gnawing his thumb. His office was large, with panelled walls hung with oils of former directors of the bank. When, as now, the sun was not shining directly into the window, it was a dark, depressing room.

The sound of the phone interrupted the silence once more, he turned back to it, irritated.

‘Paul, I would like you to look in, if you would, when you come back this weekend.’ It was the Roylands’ doctor, John Stanford.

Paul frowned, automatically reaching for his diary. Then he pushed it aside without opening it. ‘What is this all about, John? Do I gather it is not a social call?’

‘I’ve had the results of the tests we ran on you and Clare. I’d like to discuss them with you before I talk to you both together.’

Paul closed his eyes. Slowly he sat back in the chair.

‘Which is as good as saying that we have a problem. And as you want to see me, I gather it’s in my department?’ He took a deep breath. ‘Come on, John. Don’t pussyfoot with me. I don’t need anyone to hold my hand and look into my eyes while they talk to me. You can tell me over the phone.’

‘Very well.’ There was a pause as though John Stanford, far away in his Suffolk surgery, was choosing the right words. ‘It is the sperm count, Paul. It is low. Very low. We could repeat the test yet again, but the results are coming consistently. I’m afraid that it is very unlikely that you would ever be able to father a child. Under the circumstances, I think we can rule out the need for any further tests on Clare.’ There was a long silence. Then, ‘Paul? Are you there? Listen, we should discuss the situation. Will you look in anyway when you get back? There are avenues you should consider pursuing at this stage.’

‘You mean it’s curable?’ Paul was twisting a pencil between his fingers.

‘No, Paul. I’m sorry. But there are other ways. Adoption, artificial –’

‘No!’ Paul slammed his fist down on the desk. ‘If it is irreversible, then there is nothing to discuss with John. Nothing. Forget it. Do you understand. And John, I forbid you to tell Clare, or discuss this with her at all. Is that completely clear? I absolutely forbid it. I will tell her myself when the right moment comes.’

He put the phone down and stood up. The bottle of Scotch in the drinks cupboard in the corner of the office was still unopened. Breaking the seal he unscrewed it, pouring himself half a tumbler and sipping it slowly, his mind mercifully blank as he walked over to the window and stared down into Coleman Street. The traffic was at a standstill, the pavements crowded.

He had been watching for several minutes when slowly his attention focussed on the far side of the

road. A woman was standing there waiting to cross. She was holding a small boy by the hand. As the waited, the child began to jump up and down with excitement, looking up at her, and he saw the woman's face as she smiled down at him. It held an expression of such tenderness that for a moment he found himself biting his lip.

With a groan he turned from the window and hurled the whisky glass across the room.

Emma Cassidy was in the bath when her brother rang. Wrapped in a dark green bath sheet she slid down on the edge of her bed.

‘Hi, Paul. How are things in the City?’

‘Much as usual.’ He sounded depressed. ‘Em, I want to talk to you about Clare.’

‘Oh?’ Emma was suspicious.

‘You know she’s got very involved with this yoga stuff. She’s taking it very seriously.’

‘That’s a good thing, surely.’ Emma threw herself back on the heaped pillows. Downstairs, her daughter Julia was sitting watching children’s TV. For five minutes the house was peaceful. ‘I’ve done some yoga myself. It did wonders for my figure.’

‘No doubt. But she is doing it because she is obsessed with this idea of having a baby.’ Paul’s voice was hard. ‘It’s crazy. She must stop thinking about it. I am sure now in my own mind that children would not be a good thing. Not for us. We manage fine without that encumbrance in our lives and we’ve got to find a way to put an end to this obsession of hers.’

There was a short silence, then Emma laughed uncertainly. ‘My God, Paul. I thought it was you who kept on about having a son all the time. It was you who was making poor Clare feel so bad about it.’

‘In which case I must disabuse her of the idea.’ Paul was abrupt. ‘I’ve changed my mind.’

Emma sat up straight. She frowned. ‘Has something happened, Paul? What is it?’

‘I’m thinking of Clare. She’s been under a lot of strain.’ He sounded repressive. ‘And she is taking this yoga too far. I don’t like the sound of this man who has been teaching her, or the thought of him wandering around my house. He is beginning to get her involved in some weird practices.’

‘Really?’ Emma gave a breathless laugh. ‘You know, I think I like the sound of that. I wonder if they’d let me join in!’

‘I’m being serious, Emma. Something has to be done, before it gets out of hand. I want you to talk and talk her out of this whole stupid business.’

‘Why me, Paul? Why can’t you do it?’ Emma was serious again.

‘Because she won’t listen to me. You know what she’s like. She can be so damn stubborn.’

Emma frowned. ‘I always thought you two could talk, Paul. Have you been quarrelling again?’

‘We have not.’ He was growing exasperated. ‘Just help me in this, Emma! You have always got on well with her. She’ll listen to you. I have to nip this thing in the bud. When did you last speak to her?’

‘I tried to ring her at Bucksters today, but your terrifying Mrs C. said she was out. I’ll try again when she comes up to town tomorrow. We’d vaguely arranged to meet on Friday anyway. But Paul, surely yoga isn’t bad? I don’t understand why you’re so worried about it.’

‘It’s not the yoga as such, it is what goes with it: it’s the meditation this man is teaching her, the mind bending, the attempts to conjure a child out of the air –’

‘Is that what she is doing?’ Emma was horrified. ‘Oh, Paul, that’s terrible. Tragic.’

‘Exactly. So will you help me?’

‘You know I will. Oh poor Clare, that’s ghastly.’

She looked up at Julia who, bored with television, had wandered into the room, chewing on an apple, and suddenly her eyes filled with tears.

Rex Cummin was standing on the balcony of his penthouse flat in Eaton Square. It was eight in the morning and the air was still cold as he absently studied the trees while waiting for his car to arrive outside the front door four floors below.

‘Here’s the mail, honey.’ His wife stepped out next to him with a handful of letters. They were a good-looking couple in their mid-fifties, both immaculately and formally dressed for the day. ‘Do you want me to fetch you some breakfast before the car gets here? Louise is late again, I’m afraid.’

He looked up from thumbing through the pile of envelopes. ‘Don’t be too hard on that kid, Mary. She’s efficient enough, and she has a long way to come on the bus. Toch!’ He gave an exclamation of disgust and handed the post back to her. ‘Still nothing from that Scotch solicitor! Dammit, Mary, when is that woman going to answer him?’

‘You only instructed him to make an offer for the estate last week, honey.’ She did not have to be told what he was talking about. ‘It could take months for them to get round to discussing it.’

She noticed with a worried frown that he had clenched his fists and that the vein in his temple was beginning to throb again.

‘Months is no good!’ he shouted. ‘Sigma has got to have that land all signed and sealed before any breath of suspicion about the secret seismological surveys leaks out. Hell, Mary, what we’ve been doing is strictly against the law in this country. You can’t go round doing surveys on other people’s property without permission. We’ve got to cover ourselves. That’s why this place is so perfect. We’ll make Mrs Royland a good offer for that hotel – which must be losing her thousands a year. OK, so everyone realises why we did it later, but by then it will be too late. My God, even Bob Vogel in Houston isn’t on to the implications of those surveys yet.’ He slapped his fist into his palm. ‘And we have to wait for some goddam British solicitor to ass about –’ He winced suddenly, his hand going to his diaphragm.

His wife’s practised eyes missed nothing. ‘I’ll get you some Maalox, honey, it’ll line your stomach.’ She turned back towards the windows. Then she hesitated. ‘Did you make offers on any of the rest of the properties in that area?’ It was a seemingly innocent question.

He shook his head. ‘There are going to be problems with the rest. Most of it is owned by the National Trust for Scotland and people like that. We’ll put in bids later if the British government gives us exploration licences. Besides, those test bores may not strike so lucky –’ He paused thoughtfully. ‘No, Duncairn is perfect. The test results; it’s privately owned; and there’s the hotel as the perfect excuse for the offer. My God, Mary, do you know there’s even a ruined castle!’

‘I know, Rex. You already told me.’ Did he really think she could have forgotten? The letters from the Scottish American societies, the passionate delving into his ancestry, the genealogists in London and Edinburgh, the excitement when he found that he might be descended from an ancient Scottish family; a family who had once owned amongst many others a castle on the wild north-eastern seaboard of Scotland, a castle which now was possibly sitting on seven million or so barrels of oil. She smiled indulgently. ‘Now, you promise me you’ll eat something on the plane.’

‘Sure, honey.’ He was impatient. ‘And you call me, at once – at once – if that letter comes.’

‘Of course.’ She walked ahead of him through the wide open full-length windows into the large drawing room with its modern tubular steel and glass furniture.

Something crossed her mind suddenly. ‘Why did you ask him to send his letter here, Rex? Why not straight to the office?’

He scowled, running his fingers through his hair. ‘Not a word of this must get out, Mary. Not one word. I sometimes think not everyone in that office is entirely loyal. No!’ He raised his hand as she was about to protest. ‘No, I can tell. Ever since I was ill they’ve been watching, waiting to see if I’

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