

Edinburgh, Scotland 23 October 1833

*Isla's narrative*

*I am dying; I know it well enough. It does not matter that Dr. Walters comes up from Little France to tell me my heart is beating like a drum, that I will live for another year, mebbe two. Or that Charlotte is full of pretty lies of how well I look, and how much better I seem. I have the inside knowledge; I will go soon. I am ready enough to go, to surrender my soul and be done with all this. Lately I have longed for it. But there is still one thing that I must do before I move on to the dark-ness and the mystery.*

*Slowly I readjust my blankets. The doctor has just left and now I pray. I am old, very old, so old that I don't really know how old I am. On that score and what day it is, or where I put my glass down I am very vague. My skin is wrinkled and spotted and my grey hair is streaked with white, although I pretend that it is not. I am quite sick of being abed, but my body is useless. This old body; it can find no way to lie that doesn't pain me. Now it's cold, now it's hot, it can't keep its food down, it's always tired. This body used to be my servant but now it is my master. But that is only my body; my brain is as braw as ever, and I enjoy a laugh. Aye, on some subjects I'm sharp as a needle. I know everyone who visits (though I may forget their name); I know the news of the day, who is who in politics and the Kirk. And today there is something that I want to do.*

*These days my heart beats irregular but the heart feelings are still there. My eyes do gleam when Hannah, or anyone else, mentions my Dunc, though it's years since he passed. Ah, he were a grand man, a proper man, though times I were devil to him.*

*I run my fingers along Belle's spine, feeling each wee bump, making her purr with pleasure. Ever since I've been abed I have had a long pinch of time to study my fine, striking tabby. The triangle of her nose is red as berries, her chin is white as the snow on the heath and her slanted almond-shaped eyes are a blazing yellow, green and gold all whirled into one. Black slits of pupils watch everything and miss nothing. She has russet-coloured fur with black stripes, and two of these sooty stripes appear above the inner curve of her eyes and arc upward like the Cossack's sabres. More black stripes sit in a necklet around her throat. Och, I would know her in any crowd of tabbies. Her whiskers are long and so attuned she can sense a wee flea on the other side of the door, and her ears are always on alert. Lithe and lean and fussy she be; likes to play with mice and birds, tossing them back and forth between her paws and rolling them about on the ground. She rarely eats them but puts them away to play with later. Aye, she is a fussy spot, my Belle. Her claws are like the finest needles; I could do my sewing with them. She does not take to being patted except by me and Charlotte, and now and again by Hannah; she chooses whose ankles she rubs against and whose lap she deigns to rest on, and they are not many. Aye, she may be a dumb beast, but I swear she knows more than many humans.*

*Belle reminds me so of Duncan; she always followed him about, sat on his lap and ate from his hand as if no one else existed. My Dunc, I'm still missing him as if he had been here this morning. He was, still is, the love of my life; his death was nearly my death too. I did not want to live no more, so desolate was I; not a thing I would ever show to the world but still I hug it to myself and bide my time. I long for him just like the lassie I was when we met. Soon, I think I will join him; soon, God will let me go. I'm not afraid nor worried. No,*

*though I ken not what it will be like. I read the Holy Bible every day and it tells me little of Heaven; but I am sure there be a place where I will find Duncan and that place will be Heaven for me.*

*I lie still staring at the low ceiling; I've no energy at all for moving. I want to rise but cannot. Trapped now, forever in the bed. I am in a dream really, a long slow dream that lasts through days and nights, dream- ing of Duncan and how I loved him. And he loved me too. Of how he wrapped his arms so lovingly around me and smiled that slow seductive smile. 'We're connected you and I. We've been connected ever since that day in the village, me trying to sell my strange medicines to a bonny lass.' He always spoke proper, Duncan; no ta country fool, like me. With each word my heart beat harder. Oh, he got into my soul alright but I wondered, what should I do? Deep inside I felt the same as he; that I was his, and he was mine. I knew it deep, ye ken. But I'd seen my ma slaving her life away and swore never to be as her. Yet I could not stop myself.*

*I fell, like a stone, into love. How I cursed my foolish- ness even as I rejoiced. Love blotted out everything else; I was anxious and content all at once. Oh, so content!*

*Now ye know I were a bonnie lassie then — all green eyes and red hair, and I'd had my fun a teasin' all the would-be lovers round the place. I'd danced a wild round at every dance and flirted wi' them all, though I got the strap for it at home now and again. Oh, I did nay care at all. The fun was too great. And now here was this fine lad, all educated and ready to have a shop of his own, talking and bowing so grandly to me. To me! And well-dressed too, like a gentleman.*