



## Prologue

Paris, 24th May 1900

HE HAD LEFT THE WINDOW open and the sound of the fruit sellers' carts, as they rattled along the cobblestones, woke him. The early-morning scents of Paris – baking bread and cold, damp, sickly sweet river water – drifted through the windows and mixed with Genevieve's perfume, the bouquet of the remainder of that second bottle of very good claret and the pleasing, masculine smell of an excellent cigar.

He smiled and stretched, remembering the assorted pleasures of the night. France was a most civilized country. Great food, fine wine, wonderfully seductive and enchanting women; too much to expect the cigars to be French. He should buy a box or two before he caught the boat train: couldn't get tobacco like that at home.

Genevieve woke, her glorious eyes focusing slowly.

'Jean,' she breathed, in that so French way she had of caressing his very ordinary Scottish name, the way that turned his legs to water. 'Jean,' she said again, and she





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stretched out her white hand with the scarlet fingernails towards him and he almost yielded.

‘Must go, my darling,’ he said, kissing her lightly but keeping out of the way of those nails, nails that could caress so softly but could scratch so deeply. ‘I have to catch the steamer train.’

‘Oh no,’ she said, her hands gripping him. ‘You said two whole days in Paris.’

He laughed. ‘It *has* been two days, *ma belle*, the most beautiful two days . . .’

‘Of our lives, my Jean.’

She was so desirable; he had never met a woman like her. He groaned and forced himself to move away from the rumpled bed. How easy it would be, and how very, very pleasurable, to slip back into the warm bed, into Genevieve’s arms. ‘I have something to attend to in Scotland, Genevieve. I’ll come back just as soon as I can.’

Genevieve was not a woman to beg. She shrugged a shoulder in a very French way. *Très bien*, her shoulders said. Who cares? I am just as content if you go. What does it matter?

For a moment he looked down at her creamy back and toyed with the idea of making her change her mind. He could do it. They were all the same, *n’est-ce pas*? And then he remembered Scotland and his responsibilities. He echoed her shrug and began to dress.





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Less than half an hour later, he was whistling merrily as he sauntered down the plushly carpeted staircase to the foyer, where two maids were already angrily scrubbing and polishing unseen dirt. He strolled past them and reached the door.

‘Monsieur, Monsieur, the bill?’

John Cameron tipped his hat lightly back on his handsome head. He stared boldly at the hotel manager out of his grey-blue eyes and laughed.

‘Don’t fret, my man. Madame will take care of it.’ And, once more whistling gaily, he was gone.

### **Priory Farm, Angus, 24th May 1900**

Pain gripped Catriona. It tore at her angrily, as if punishing her for some unknown crime. Sweat broke out on her forehead and she tried desperately not to scream. She had never believed it would be like this, never. Was she not the daughter of farmers? Had she not seen birth a dozen times a year – a thing done privately, causing as little trouble as possible.

‘Ach, lassie, let it out. There’s no one to hear but me and auld Jock out there and he’d bear it for you, if he could.’ The voice was that of Maggie, employed by Jock Cameron as dairy maid and now midwife.

Catriona’s scream tore through the air and died to a gasping whimper. Maggie held her hand and, outside, Jock stopped his pacing and listened.





‘Dear God, help the lassie, as I’ve never been able to help.’

She was quiet. Was that it? Was it over? Was he a grandfather?

There was another scream, cut short by the simple expedient of biting as hard as Catriona could on the rolled-up towel that old Maggie had put into her open mouth. Catriona’s eyes rolled in agony; there was a name she wanted to call out, but she would not. She would not beg and she would not hurt the old man any more by having him hear it.

The pain receded and she took the towel away. ‘It’s cold for May, Maggie, so cold.’

The midwife looked at the girl for a moment. Cold? It was a perfect May day. This morning the sweat had been rolling down between her ample breasts as she had sat milking in the parlour, and now her newly washed cotton frock was damp with perspiration. But the lassie was cold. ‘Dear Lord, shock.’ She ran to the airing cupboard for clean, warm blankets. Everything was to hand, meticulously prepared by Catriona herself.

‘Let me wrap you up a bit more, lassie: you’ve lost a wheen too much blood but it’ll soon be over. In a moment, the next push will bring us the head and your bonnie wee bairn will slip out like a boat being launched into the Tay.’

Catriona could hear Maggie’s voice but she could not make out the words. She seemed to be floating. It was such





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a lovely feeling. She had been so cold, and now she was wrapped up the way her own mother had bundled her up against the cold of an Angus winter. So safe, so secure. Nothing hurt, nothing mattered – nothing, nothing. She would drift away, oh so slowly, like a leaf tossed into a quiet stream.

But Maggie would not let her slip away into that peace and contentment. She shook the girl, she cajoled, she wheedled. ‘Catriona, Catriona, fight, lassie, fight. The bairn’s crowning. He’s coming, lass. I can see his head. What a crown of dark hair, just like his daddy.’

His daddy. John. John with his grey-blue eyes, his devastating smile, his hands that could . . . For a moment she struggled but no, it was so warm here, so peaceful – no pain, no tears, no wondering why. She would stay here where it was warm, where nothing hurt, where sound was blurred and hazy and soft. ‘Oh, John, why?’ Had she said the words or just thought them? She had no time to wonder, for the pain struck again and instinct took over her exhausted body.

‘Work with the pains, lassie, dinnae fight them. That’s it, that’s it. Just a wee breath there, a wee rest to get ready for the next one.’

In the passageway outside, Jock Cameron paced as he waited. It was his fault, all of it. That lassie had been in there for fourteen hours trying to birth her baby, and





the man who should have been here, either by himself or marching side by side with Jock, was God alone knew where.

‘I spoilt him, Mattie,’ he told his long-dead wife. ‘He was that bonnie though, and always minded me of you. I couldnae hit you, Mattie, that’s what it would have felt like and he knew it, the wee rascal, but he’s a grown man now, Mattie. I’ll never forgive him for this and if the good Lord spares me my daughter-in-law and my grandchild, I’ll make it up to them.’

He walked on, backwards and forwards, sometimes praying to the Almighty, at other times justifying himself to his Mattie. Then he would work out how best to reward Catriona for her patience, her friendliness, her charm. He would bypass John, hurt him in his pocket – that would teach him. He would see the lawyer fellow and write the babe in and John out.

The door of the best bedroom opened and Maggie stood there, drying her hands on one of Catriona’s best towels. She was smiling – well, as near as auld Maggie could get to a smile for a man. ‘You can stop your tramp-ing, Jock Cameron. You’ve near worn a hole in that good rug and it’s the mistress will have to be on her knees darn-ing it, and her with more than enough to do.’

‘Catriona? The bairn?’ He could barely speak, so anxious was he.





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'Mistress Cameron's fine. A bit tired, and who's to wonder at that after what she's been through. The bairn's bonnie. She'll lead you a dance, you auld fool.'

'A lassie?' The relief was so great that he felt his knees buckle and he forced them to stay straight. A wee girl. What a comfort to an auld man a wee lassie would be. He felt humble and grateful.

'Can I see them?' he asked.

She stood back to let him enter the dark, low-roofed room. Catriona, her face pale in the cloud of her red hair, was lying back against the pillows, but she opened her eyes as if she sensed his presence and smiled tiredly at him. In her arms rested a tiny shawl-wrapped bundle, no bigger, he thought, than one of her own dumplings.

'I'm sorry it's no a laddie, Faither.'

'A laddie?' His heart swelled within him with love and he put out a hard, calloused, work-worn finger and gently touched the bundle. 'Ach, Catriona Cameron, was it not a lassie like you and my Mattie that this house needed?'

The baby lay snug in her mother's arms, and as her grandfather leaned over she yawned heartily in his face. Then she opened her eyes and stared at him measuringly, as if she found him wanting. He was captivated.

'You'll have thought of a name, lass.'

Catriona was quiet, as if summoning up her strength. She had been through so much, one way and another, in





the past nine months. At last she said, 'I prayed for a boy, another John.'

Mattie, he thought, it should be Mattie. Then he turned from his study of the baby's face and looked at the serene expression of his daughter-in-law, after all she had been through. Women were amazing creatures. He would never understand them.

'Do you know what day it is today, lass? It's the auld Queen's birthday. Can you believe she's eighty-one years old and most of that spent on the throne? Victoria. Is that no a name for a bonnie bairn?'

'Victoria. It's perfect. Welcome, Victoria Cameron.'

Miss Cameron yawned again and thus dismissed her court.

'I'll leave you to sleep, lass. I'm sorry my son's no at your side where he belongs, Catriona. If I could change him I would, but I promise you this, lass. Everything I have is yours and the bairn's and I'll no allow John to give you any more pain.'

She tried to argue, to talk, to tell him that a halfpenny-worth of love from John Cameron was worth more to her than anything.

'It has to be my fault,' she tried to say. But how can you tell your father-in-law that in some essential way you must have failed his son? Otherwise John would be here, wouldn't he? She knew well that they did no real business







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in France. John's business trips to see stock, to see crops – she forced herself to admit that he had to be seeing other women. 'But, dear God, dear God, I have no pride. I want him. I need him.'

She closed her eyes and the old man tiptoed out and left her to sleep.

John Cameron arrived home from his latest business trip in France to be met by the barrel of his father's shotgun.

'You shouldnae have dismissed your cabbie, lad. It's a long walk to the town in your fancy shoes.'

'Father, are you crazy, man? It's me, John.' He made to move closer to the house, but the rock-steady hands of the old man gestured backwards with the gun – the gun that John knew could be used to deadly effect against foxes and other predators. Jock Cameron never wasted a shot. He would not waste any now.

'I know fine who you are. Isn't it me that's ashamed of fathering you.'

'Come on, Father, it was business. Wasn't I looking at French cattle? I want to see my wife and my bairn. You cannae deny me my own child. A boy it'll be – a grand, healthy John Cameron to carry on the farm.'

'And what do you care about the child or the farm? What were you doing the night your wife lay in there near bleeding to death to bring your daughter into the world?'





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You're nae good, John. You never were, and for your mother's sake I wouldnae let myself admit what I saw, but that's over. I should have belted you years ago, and as God's my witness, you come one step nearer this house and I'll blow yer head aff and swing fer you.'

John started to shout then. 'Ye crazy auld fool. I'll get the bobbies in. Catriona, Catriona, come out here and tell that auld devil to let me in my own house.'

'It's my house, John Cameron,' Old Jock said, 'and one day it'll be the lassie's. Take yourself back to your French whore, and see if she'll keep ye warm when she finds out the landed gentleman has lost his land. Not a penny more do you get from me. I'll be at Boatman's office first thing in the morning to change my will.'

He wouldn't shoot him, he wouldn't. John moved closer and the gun spoke. John jumped as the dust flew from the ground exactly in front of his right foot.

'You're crazy, you old fool.' He was crying with fear and anger, and with fatigue. 'Catriona,' he called out desperately, 'Catriona.' But he did not see the weeping figure at the window, and he turned from the gun and stumbled blindly into the night.





# 1

1910

IT HAS BEEN SAID BEFORE, and will, no doubt, be said again, that the time before the Great War was very special.

Certainly it was for Victoria Cameron. She was a most important small person, at least in the eyes of Grampa, for whom she could do no wrong. Mamma was firmer, but that was the way, Victoria knew, of both mothers and grandfathers. She loved them both fiercely, and she loved the old stone farmhouse with its magic kingdom of the walled farmyard, where Grampa would groom the Clydesdales. There were always six huge, broad, gentle beasts with noble names – Scottish Maid, Glentana, Thermopylae, Stornoway, Queensberry and, of course, the Cutty Sark. Grampa never used these grand names; to him the horses were always ‘hen’, ‘lass’, or ‘ma wee laddie’.

To the end of her life, Victoria could recall him as he polished their coats before hitching them up to the





carriages, which local children took on their annual Sunday school picnics.

‘That’s it, hen, good lass. Aye, that’s ma own good lass.’

Sometimes he would hoist Victoria up and put her on the broad back of a large horse. She would clutch the mane with her little hands and look down, down from the broad, gleaming shoulders of the horse to the ground so far, so very far below; and she would look into Jock’s whiskered face and she would laugh. Fear? She did not know the meaning of the word, not with Grampa there, with his strong brown hands.

Did the sun always shine in the years before the war? There must have been rain and snow, but Victoria’s memories were full of sun-filled days, days when she would wander out of the farmyard and follow one of the drystone dykes to the burn. There were two stiles between the house and the burn. Years later she could still feel the sense of adventure that she experienced each time she climbed a stile and wandered farther away from her mother. She never went too far, though, for in later years she recalled that she had always been able to see the house.

Her mother worked the whole day long. Everything in the house, including Victoria, was scrubbed to within an inch of its life. Like the linens, Victoria was also starched and ironed.





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Mamma baked, preserved, cured and dressed, and in the evenings she sewed and mended, knitted beautiful woollens for the three of them and somehow found time to do exquisite embroidery.

Her day of rest was Sunday, and so Sunday was Victoria's favourite day of the week. Jock would hitch two of the Clydesdales to the carriage, and everyone, masters and maids, stiff and starched in their Sunday best, would set off for their beautiful little country church.

But it was the time after the traditional huge Sunday midday dinner that Victoria relished. It was then that she and Grampa would escape. For this truancy they had a beautiful little phaeton, which was always pulled by the Scottish Maid, the lightest of the Clydesdales, and off they would go, Grampa in his black frock-coat and hat and the child stiff and starched in her pinafore and best Leghorn hat.

There was not a nook or cranny in Angus that they left undiscovered. The old man was never loquacious, but their silences were companionable. Every now and again he would say, 'Whoa, maid. Whoa, ma lass,' and together old man and young child would sit and drink in the view. Wherever it was, there were always trees somewhere in the landscape.

'Breathe deep, Victoria,' he would say, 'there's no air in the world to match this. It's a perfect walnut shell day.'





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The little girl looked up at him with those clear, grey-blue eyes – Mattie’s eyes. It was bearable to think of them as Mattie’s eyes.

‘What’s a walnut shell day, Grampa?’

‘A day that’s beautiful because you’re with the person you love most in all the world. Everything is so perfect that you want to keep it for ever, so you put it in a walnut shell and save it for the days when nothing is good. Then, my wee Victoria, you take it out and all the joy and peace is there just as you remembered it. Oh, my wee Victoria, is life not hard at times, and does that not make these walnut shell days a’ the mair precious?’

He looked gently down at the much-loved child and knew that she did not really understand.

Momentarily his heart sank – for Jock Cameron knew that, in time, God love her, she would know only too well what he meant.

‘Let there be plenty of walnut shell days for her, Lord,’ he prayed, and for months afterwards he would save walnut shells for Victoria to attempt to fill.

Memories of past picnics were enclosed in them. Wrapped in a clean, white linen napkin would be their shivery bite. They would sit on their tartan rug in the shadow of a ruined abbey and eat their scones and talk of the holy men who had lived there, and of how they must have enjoyed just the same trees, ‘but, never the same





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scones, Victoria.' Grampa would laugh, for everyone in Angus knew that there was no finer baker than Catriona Cameron.

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Victoria Cameron was so used to being the centre of attention that it came as rather a shock to find herself ostracized at the local primary school. Only the other social outcast, Nellie Bains, who wore ragged clothes, smelled and had a constantly dripping nose, wanted to play with her. And Victoria, who had been brought up to know her own worth, did not want to be anywhere near a dirty, ragged child like Nellie Bains. When she was small, Victoria saw only the rags, the tangled hair, the runny nose. She did not see the smile of pure friendship; she was too young and self-centred to glimpse the reflection of a loving heart.

'Nobody plays with me, Mamma,' Victoria complained. She did not mention Nellie, who was a nobody and therefore did not exist.

Catriona's eyes filled with tears. How dare they make her child suffer? She hugged her daughter so hard that the little girl pushed herself away. She put her balled-up handkerchief into the front pocket of her hand-embroidered apron and tossed back her dark hair.

'Nellie Bains said a bad word, a really, really bad word. She said I was one and none of the nice girls is allowed



to play with me.' She leaned towards her mother and whispered the offending word so quietly into her ear that Catriona, taken by surprise, asked her to repeat it, and was then both shocked and mortified that her little daughter had ever uttered such a word.

'You are not,' said Catriona angrily. 'Shallow minds, with not enough to do but make up stories. Just never you mind, Victoria. Some day a really nice little girl will want to play with you.'

'Why some day? And what does that bad word mean, Mamma?'

But Catriona refused to tell her, saying that well-brought-up children should not know such words. Victoria was looking both upset and slightly mutinous. Catriona desperately tried to find a solution and then she found one, but one that frightened her, for she was not used to confrontation. 'I know, Victoria. I'll come into the school and have a word with Miss Spencer.'

But the word with Miss Spencer did not mend matters, for Miss Spencer looked down her educated nose and told Catriona that it was all highly irregular and she could not control what the children learned in their own homes.

Catriona had never disliked anyone in her entire life. Even her philandering husband had received no criticism from her, but this was different: this concerned her child.





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Narrow spinster, thought Catriona angrily. No wonder no man's wanted her. Thirty years old, if she's a day, and trying to look like a lassie.

But she was no match for the contempt of the other woman. Besides, Catriona had been brought up to think teachers superior to ordinary mortals. Were they not full of book learning? Some had even been to a place called the university. That inbred feeling of inferiority, however, was warring with her own very justifiable anger.

'Just make sure you control what they learn here, miss,' she said furiously and, head up in defeat, she walked away.

And then Nellie, angry that her offers of friendship were constantly being spurned, took matters into her own rather grubby little hands and told Victoria exactly what the bad word meant.

'You've no pa, you stuck-up wee child, and your ma's no better than she should be.'

Victoria looked at Nellie, at her dirty face and her snotty nose. She was not quite sure what Nellie was saying, but she recognized the vindictiveness with which it was said. She slapped Nellie hard across her wizened wee face. Then she turned and ran crying from the playground, and she did not stop running until she reached the haven of the farmhouse.

'Where is my father?' she blurted out as soon as she could draw breath.





Catriona, who had felt the heart stop beating in her body as her distraught daughter almost fell in through the door, sat down on a kitchen chair, something she seldom did during the day. She took a deep breath and tried to steady the wild clamour of her heart. It had to come, of course. Father had warned her that she should have spoken of John, so that the bairn could grow up accepting his absence. But it was hard, so hard, to admit her failure. She took the angry, distressed child on her lap.

‘Your father was not a very good . . . not a very dependable family-type of man, Victoria, not like Grampa; but I loved him very much . . . Maybe I still do,’ she added sadly. ‘He had charm, you see, like Grampa, but he was never meant to be a farmer – more a man of the world. He has gone away: he went away before you were even born. He was Grampa’s son, but we don’t speak of him.’

‘Where is he? Didn’t he like me? Grampa likes me.’

Catriona looked at her daughter. Which question to answer? The memory of that awful evening when John had turned up at the farmhouse, only to find the door barred and his father standing there with a double-barrelled shotgun in his hands, made her wince. She could almost hear the angry voices. At first John had cajoled, in the way he usually did, to worm his way back into his wife’s or his father’s affections.

‘Father,’ Catriona had begged. ‘He’s sorry. He’s Victoria’s father. I cannot deny my bairn her father.’





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'I'll see Boatman about more than my will the morn, Catriona. Lassie, you cannot still love him after the way he's treated you.'

'I don't know. Sometimes I hate him . . . sometimes . . .'

Jock had looked down at her compassionately. 'That goes, lassie, believe me. You're better off without John. He'll break yer heart.' He had turned back to the window and pushed the barrel of the shotgun through the opening. The blast had shattered the silence and caused the sleeping baby to awake, screaming.

Catriona had stared at her father-in-law and the blood had receded from her cheeks. 'John,' she had gasped on the point of fainting.

'Lassie, lassie, away to the bairn. It was only a rat that was sunning itself at my very byre door. I was wanting to mind John on who it was that taught him to shoot.'

And now Catriona turned to her daughter. 'He never knew you, sweetheart. When he did come home after you were born, Grampa wouldn't let him in the house. He left us, sweetheart, but I will never leave you, never.'

Victoria had stopped sobbing. Still she shuddered, but now she was calmer.

'And I will never leave you, Mamma, never.'

There was an earnestness in the young voice that almost frightened Catriona as the child added, 'That's a really truly promise, Mamma.'

