

CHAPTER ONE

Tristan MacKenzie was taller than I had expected, and thinner too. I had imagined he would be short and round and elderly, like Señor da Costa, my lawyer in Santiago. The Glasgow solicitor was in his early forties; his build was athletic, and he had the sort of face that can only be rendered less intimidating if its owner allows it to break into a smile, which MacKenzie did not deign to do during our interview.

‘This could have been settled while I was away, Mr Cameron.’ MacKenzie made no effort to pronounce ‘Camarón’ in the Spanish way. As he spoke, he looked down at the document in front of him. When he had finished speaking, he looked up and across the table. He waited for me to explain.

‘I was told by your office that it must wait until your return.’

His expression changed microscopically – a slight narrowing of the eyes that stretched the pale skin over his cheekbones even more tightly. ‘It is a simple transaction.’

‘I had no idea that my father owned property in Scotland,’ I said. ‘No idea, at least until I discovered these documents.’

This observation was too inconsequential, in delivery and substance, to be of interest to MacKenzie, who was conspicuously disinclined to engage in small talk. I added quickly, ‘I would like to see the property and then I would like to sell it.’

He shook his head. It was not immediately clear to me whether he intended by this to indicate that I could not proceed in the manner I had described, or that what I had said was so obviously my intention that it hardly needed to be stated.

After my father was killed in the American siege of Santiago de Cuba, I found among his papers the deed to a property on the Isle of Bute on the west coast of Scotland. My mother was Scottish. I spent time there when I was very small – so small that I can remember almost nothing about it. I do not remember my mother at all.

‘All that you have to do is to sign this Deed of Succession, which we will countersign and notarise. This, together with your mother’s death certificate, will be sufficient for you to come into your property, Mr Cameron. After that you may live in it or sell it . . . or demolish it if you like. That is not a matter for this firm.’

His indifference was exasperating, but exasperation was not uppermost in my mind. I had a more practical preoccupation.

‘I don’t have my mother’s death certificate,’ I said. ‘I have had no connection with my mother since I was a child.’

‘No connection?’ He spoke as if I had acknowledged some sort of inexcusable dereliction of duty.

‘That is why your clerk advised me to wait for your return.’ I had waited more than two months for MacKenzie to conclude a visit to his family in Cape Town.

He was unwilling to concede that his initial remark – to the effect that the business could have been dispatched easily without his involvement – was misplaced. ‘Well, it’s only a matter of finding a record of your mother’s death,’ he said.

‘I don’t know if she’s dead.’

His expression was transformed by a curling of the thin lips. ‘You don’t know if she’s dead?’

I shook my head.

‘Then she may be entitled to a third of this estate.’

‘Which is why I was advised to wait until your return.’ I cannot say I invested this statement with the sort of sonority that indicates the conclusive settlement of an argument. All I had done was transfer an important piece of information – with difficulty – to the mind of an indifferent and rather rude solicitor.

‘You will have to establish whether or not your mother is dead,’ he said.

‘I had hoped that you would be able to do that on my behalf. I have only been in this country for a short period. I

am not a citizen. I do not have any legal standing—’

He waved his hand. ‘Yes, yes, we can do this, but it may take time.’

The delay, it seemed to me, could only be viewed as an irritant from the point of view of the heir to the property, yet MacKenzie spoke as though this additional imposition were a personal affront.

‘I do not intend to live in the property,’ I said. ‘I will sell it.’

He stared at me. I paused before I obliged him by explaining why I repeated my intention to put the house on the market. He was the sort of individual, I had gathered by now, who strives to maintain a certain advantage by requiring others to assume a position of harassed defence.

‘It is not clear to me how much it may be worth.’ I said. ‘If my mother is alive, I have no objection to her receiving whatever she is entitled to.’

‘These things are a matter of law,’ he said, as though I had suggested otherwise.

I waited for him to continue.

He chose not to.

‘How much is the property worth?’ I asked.

He shrugged. ‘You cannot know that until you sell it.’ He glanced down at one of the documents in front of him. ‘A modern villa built on the waterfront near the new pier at Rothesay, eight rooms, extensive grounds . . . an orchard . . . outbuildings.’ He looked up at me. ‘Assuming it’s in good repair, and there is nothing here to indicate that it isn’t, you would stand to make a tidy sum, Mr Cameron.’

As I walked away from MacKenzie's office I experienced a succession of emotions. The lawyer had offered no apology, not even the formulaic one that would have been a matter of courtesy on the part of one professional gentleman whose prolonged absence had caused inconvenience to another professional gentleman. On the contrary, he had spoken to me as though the complications in the case of my inheritance were in some way my own fault and represented an onerous and unwelcome obstacle to the speedy completion of a transaction in which he had not even the remotest interest.

I crossed the river and moved through an area of tenements beside the new railway line. In a bar there, I ordered a whisky, lit a pipe and considered the indignity of my interview with MacKenzie. He had spoken to me with an indifference that bordered on insolence. As I sipped, I looked around in the gloom and picked out shadows; noses and lips and eyes were configured and reconfigured; patterns shifted so that a variety of disparate emotions were conveyed; however, the dominant emotion in this room, I thought, was a kind of watchful resignation. There was a murmur that sometimes rose, when the punchline of a story was reached or when a statement was contradicted, but these were no more than undulations in a sea of stoicism.

The lawyer's deportment had not *bordered* on insolence. It had *been* insolent. The speed with which I slipped from speculation into certainty should not have surprised me. Nor should it have surprised me that from the conviction that an offence had been committed against my dignity I began

to develop a corresponding conviction that an offence was being planned against my interest. This man, who had shown no inclination to indulge me as a client and a gentleman, was now entrusted with establishing whether or not my mother was dead. I should have taken my business elsewhere. I should not have been so acquiescent. I should have been forthright in terminating my association with him. He had been cagey about the value of the property. That was, no doubt, because he had already begun to think of ways in which he could swindle me out of it.

How quickly arbitrary images and sequences of thought can be transmuted into nightmares. Released from the strictures of reality, the mind creates patterns that mirror truth but magnify it so that it assumes preposterous and frightening forms. I should not have been surprised at the way my thoughts about MacKenzie unfolded, but I should have been astonished by the fact that when I left the public bar I saw this same MacKenzie walking on the other side of the road, from the river towards the south side of the city. I should have been surprised too that I chose, without giving this a moment's thought, to follow him.

Coal dust from a million fires and factory furnaces had formed that acidic mist that turns to fog in wintertime. MacKenzie made an even more imposing figure now, his long raincoat picked out by lamplight. His black bowler cut into the white cloud. He walked with the swagger of a man accustomed to dominate, accustomed to intimidate others with a manner that is hectoring and abrupt. Our steps were muffled by the

mist. Muffled too were the sounds of horses' hooves and steel wheels on cobblestones. A tram passed; its klaxon sounded as though it were three blocks away and then in a moment it clattered next to us, as if emerging from a curtain of fog, like one of those heavy curtains in the theatre designed to contain everything combustible within the confines of the stage. I hurried to keep up with MacKenzie and felt the mist on my cheeks.

We passed a public house and then the figure in front of me entered an opening in the tenement that was broad enough to accommodate a carriage. I darted forward so as not to lose sight of him, and I entered the passageway. For a moment I saw nothing, not the raincoat, not the bowler, so dark was the carriage entrance. Then I made out his silhouette at the end of the passage. In the distance there was a dim gas jet and MacKenzie's form was picked out and transformed by its light.

We were in a back court laid out in a rectangle and enclosed by four tenement terraces. The oblong was criss-crossed by washing lines, some of them sagging beneath the weight of laundry. Shirts and sheets floated in the breeze like phantoms. Radiating from brick sheds that housed dustbins were low iron fences separating the areas allocated to each of the tenement entrances. MacKenzie walked beside one of the sheds towards a wall that led along the middle of the quadrangle. Another wall, which had once been the side of a shed but now stood bereft of any obvious purpose, created a kind of cul-de-sac, a small area obscured from the view of the surrounding windows. This was where MacKenzie stopped and turned.

It was dark, so dark, the darkness of death. It was the darkness that descended on Santiago when the Americans bombarded the city and at night not a candle or a lamp was lit. I heard the scuttle and scratch of rats and the sound of an argument in one of the tenement flats. In Santiago, the night was punctured by the screams of those who were wounded and those who were afraid.

When you have witnessed the aftermath of a murderous assault your thoughts move in particular ways. My thoughts moved towards horror.

Limbs that have been amputated with clinical precision leave a wound that is quite distinct from wounds created by demented fury. Great quantities of blood, of course, but the nature of the injury differs according to the mind that caused it. I have seen the cleanly chopped spaghetti of severed veins and ligaments when the work was done carefully. I have seen the gruesome *mélange* that is the legacy of a maniacal attack.

The maniacal attack is caused by a misalignment, a miscalculation as old as humanity itself. It is caused by the futile attempt to assuage the pain and imperfection of our mortality through violence. The greater the imperfection, the greater the violence. Whatever the momentary release, the consequence must ever be the same – a new and wretched addition to the sum of human misery.

The man who seeks to right a wrong, to respond to injustice, perceived or real, through violence does not think in a measured way, however. He acts on impulse. He responds to his elemental dissatisfaction by raising a hand to strike at the source of his injury.

When my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I could see MacKenzie's raincoat. It was splayed out on either side of his body like a blanket in the mud and ash between the shed and the two walls, and his bowler hat lay a little way away. Great quantities of blood. He had been felled not by one blow but by twenty, the rhythmic, vicious, bone-shattering application of a blade to his neck, his shoulders, his torso, even his arms and legs once he lay on the ground.

The results of this animal violence jolted me as though I had been in a trance, as though I were waking from a dream so vivid as to be confused with reality. This dream was woven into my reality. I could not dismiss it, as though my thoughts, my impulses, were unaffected by the violence I had witnessed since the shelling of Santiago.