The Touch
Collen McCullough

Chapter 1

One

A CHANGE OF FORTUNE

"YOUR COUSIN Alexander has written for a wife," said James Drummond, looking up from a sheet of paper.

The summons to see her father in the front parlor had fallen on Elizabeth like a blow; such formality meant a lecture for transgression, followed by a punishment appropriate for the offense. Well, she knew what she had done-over-salted this morning's porridge-and knew too what her punishment was bound to be-to eat unsalted porridge for the rest of the year. Father was careful with his money, he'd not spend it on a grain more salt than he had to.

So, hands behind her back, Elizabeth stood in front of the shabby wing chair, her mouth dropped open at this amazing news.

"He asks for Jean, which is daft-does he think time stands still?" James brandished the letter indignantly, then transferred his gaze from it to this youngest child, light from the window pouring over her while he sat concealed by shadows. "You're made like any other female, so it will have to be you."

"Me?"

"Are you deaf, girl? Aye, you. Who else is there?"

"But Father! If he asks for Jean, he'll not want me."

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"Any respectable, decently brought-up young woman will do, judging by the state of affairs in the place he writes from."

"Where does he write from?" she asked, knowing that she wouldn't be allowed to read the letter.

"New South Wales." James grunted, a satisfied sound. "It seems your cousin Alexander has done well for himself-made a wee fortune on the goldfields." His brow wrinkled. "Or," he temporized, "at least has made enough to afford a wife."

Her first shock was dissipating, to be replaced by dismay. "Wouldn't it be simpler for him to find a wife there, Father?"

"In New South Wales? It's naught but harlots, ex-convicts and English snobs when it comes to women, he says. Nay, he saw Jeannie when he was last home, and took a strong fancy to her. Asked for her hand then. I refused-well, why would I have taken a shiftless boilermaker's apprentice living in the Glasgow stews for Jeannie, and her barely sixteen? Your age, girl. That's why I'm sure you'll do for him-he likes them young. What he's after is a Scots wife whose virtue is above reproach, whose blood he shares and can trust. That's what he says, at any rate." James Drummond rose to his feet, brushed past his daughter and marched into the kitchen. "Make me some tea."

Out came the whisky bottle while Elizabeth threw tea leaves into the warmed pot and poured boiling water on top of them. Father was a presbyter-an elder of the kirk-so was not a drinker, let alone a drunkard. If he poured a dollop of whisky into his teacup, it was only upon the receipt of splendid news, like the birth of a grandson. Yet why was this such splendid news? What would he do, with no daughter to look after him?

What was really in that letter? Perhaps, thought Elizabeth, accelerating the steeping of the tea by stirring it with a spoon, the whisky would provide some answers. Father when slightly befuddled was actually talkative. He might betray its secrets.

"Does my cousin Alexander have anything else to say?" she ventured as soon as the first cup was down and the second poured.

"Not very much. He's no fonder of words than any other of the Drummond ilk." Came a snort. "Drummond, indeed! It's not his name anymore, if you can believe that. He changed it to Kinross when he was in America. So you won't be Mrs. Alexander Drummond, you'll be Mrs. Alexander Kinross."

It did not occur to Elizabeth that she might dispute this arbitrary decision about her destiny, either at that moment or much later, when enough time had passed to see the thing clearly. The very thought of disobeying Father in such an important matter was more terrifying than anything she could imagine except a scolding from the Reverend Dr. Murray. Not that Elizabeth Drummond lacked courage or spirit; more that, as the motherless youngest, she had spent all her little life being tyrannized by two terrible old men, her father and his minister of religion.

"Kinross is the name of our town and county, not the name of a clan," she said.

"I daresay he had his reasons for changing," said James with unusual tolerance, sipping at his second tipple.

"Some sort of crime, Father?"

"I doubt that, or he'd not be so open now. Alexander was always headstrong, always too big for his boots. Your uncle Duncan tried, but couldn't manage him." James heaved a huge, happy sigh. "Alastair and Mary can move in with me. They'll come into a tidy sum when I'm six feet under."

"A tidy sum?"

"Aye. Your husband-to-be has sent a bank draft to cover the cost of sending you out to New South Wales. A thousand pounds."

She gaped. "A thousand pounds?"

"You heard me. But don't get your head turned around, girl. You can have twenty pounds to fill your glory box and five for your wedding finery. He says you're to be sent first-class and with a maid-well, I'll not countenance such extravagance! Och, awful! First thing tomorrow I'll write to the Edinburgh and Glasgow newspapers to post an advertisement." Down came his spiky sandy lashes, a sign of deep thought. "What I want is a respectable married couple belonging to the kirk who are planning to emigrate to New South Wales. If they're willing to take you along, I'll pay them fifty pounds." His lids lifted to reveal his bright blue eyes. "They'll grab at it. And I'll put nine hundred and twenty-five pounds in my purse. A tidy sum."

"But will Alastair and Mary be willing to move in, Father?"

"If they're not, I'll leave my tidy sum to Robbie and Bella or Angus and Ophelia," said James Drummond smugly.

Having served him two thick bacon sandwiches for his Sunday supper, Elizabeth threw her plaid around her shoulders and escaped on the pretext that she'd better see if the cow had come home.

THE HOUSE wherein James Drummond had brought up his large family lay on the outskirts of Kinross, a village dignified with the status of market-town because it was the capital of Kinross County. At twelve by ten miles, Kinross was the second-smallest county in Scotland, but made up for its lack of size by some slight degree of prosperity.

The woollen mill, the two flour mills and the brewery were belching black smoke, for no mill owner let his boilers go out just because it was a Sunday; cheaper than stoking from scratch on Mondays. There was sufficient coal in the southern part of the county to permit of these modest local industries, and thanks to them James Drummond had not suffered the fate of so many Scotsmen, forced to leave their native land in order to find work and live, or else subsist in the squalor of a reeking city slum. Like his elder brother, Duncan, who was Alexander's father, James had worked his fifty-five years at the woollen mill, turning out lengths of checkered cloth for the Sassenachs after the Queen had brought tartan into fashion.

The strong Scottish winds blew the stack-smoke away like charcoal under an artist's thumb and opened the pale blue vault to near-infinity. In the distance were the Ochils and the Lomonds, purple with autumn heather, high wild mountains where crofter's cottages swung decayed doors on nothing, where soon the absentee landlords would come to shoot deer, fish the lochs. Of scant concern to Kinross County, in itself a fertile plain replete with cattle, horses, sheep. The cattle were destined to become the finest London roast beef, the horses were brood mares for saddle and carriage horses, the sheep produced wool for the tartan mill and mutton for local tables. There were crops too, for the mossy soil had been extensively drained fifty years ago.

In front of Kinross town was Loch Leven, a broad, ruffled mere of that steely blue peculiar to the Scottish lochs, fed by translucent amber peat streams. Elizabeth stood on the shore only yards from the house (she knew better than to disappear from sight of it) and looked across the loch to the verdant flatlands that lay between it and the Firth of Forth. Sometimes, if the wind blew from the east, she could smell the cold, fishy depths of the North Sea, but today the wind blew off the mountains, redolent with the tang of moldering leaves. On Lochleven Isle a castle reared, the one in which Mary Queen of Scots had been imprisoned for almost a year. What must it have been like, to be both sovereign and captive? A woman trying to rule a land of fierce, outspoken men? But she had tried to bring back the Roman faith, and Elizabeth Drummond was too carefully reared a Presbyterian to think well of her for that.

I AM GOING to a place called New South Wales to marry a man I have never met, she thought. A man who asked for my sister, not for me. I am caught in a web of my father's making. What if, when I arrive, this Alexander Kinross doesn't like me? Surely, if he is an honorable man, he will send me home again! And he must be honorable, else he would not have sent for a Drummond bride. But I have read that these rude colonies so far from home do indeed suffer a scarcity of suitable wives, so I suppose he will marry me. Dear God in Heaven, make him like me! Make me like him!

SHE HAD GONE to Dr. Murray's school for two years, long enough to learn to read and write, and she was well, if narrowly, read; writing was more difficult, since James refused to spend money on paper for silly girls to despoil. But provided she kept the house spotlessly clean, cooked her father's meals to his liking, didn't spend any money, or hobnob with other, equally silly girls, Elizabeth was free to read whatever books she could find. She had two sources: the texts in the library of Dr. Murray's manse and the drearily respectable novels that circulated among the feminine members of his massive congregation. No surprise, then, that she was more informed about theology than geology, and circumstance than romance.

That marriage would be her lot had never occurred to her, though she was just beginning to be old enough to wonder about its pleasures and perils, to look at her older siblings' unions with fascinated interest. Alastair and Mary, so different, always arguing, yet, she sensed, enjoying some deeper communion; Robert and Bella, perfectly matched in parsimony; Angus and his twittery Ophelia, who seemed determined to destroy each other; Catherine and her Robert, who lived in Kirkaldy because he was a fisherman; Mary and her James, Anne and her Angus, Margaret and William. . . . And Jean, the oldest daughter, the family beauty, who at eighteen had married a Montgomery-an enviable catch for a girl of good enough blood but absolutely no dowry. Her husband had removed her to a mansion in Princes Street, Edinburgh, and that was the last time the Drummonds in Kinross ever saw Jean.

"Ashamed of us," said James with contempt.

"Very canny," said Alastair, who had loved her and was loyal.

"Very selfish," said Mary, sneering.

Very lonely, thought Elizabeth, who remembered Jean only vaguely. But if Jean's loneliness became too much to bear, her family was a mere fifty miles away. Whereas I will never be able to come home, and home is all I know.

It had been decided after Margaret married that Elizabeth, the last of James's brood who lived, was to remain a spinster at least until her father died, which family superstition believed would not be for many years to come; he was as tough as old boots and as hard as the rock of Ben Lomond. Now all of it had changed, thanks to Alexander Kinross and a thousand pounds. Alastair, James's pride and joy after the death of his namesake, would override Mary and move her and his seven children into his father's house. It would go to him anyway in the fullness of time, for he had cemented his place in James's affections by succeeding his father as loom master at the mill. But Mary-poor Mary, how she would suffer! Father deemed her a shocking spendthrift, between buying her children shoes to wear on Sundays and putting jam on the table for breakfast as well as for supper. Once she moved in with James, her children would wear boots and jam would appear only for Sunday supper.

The wind began to bluster; Elizabeth shivered, more from fear than the sudden chill. What had Father said of Alexander Kinross? "A shiftless boilermaker's apprentice living in the Glasgow stews." What did he mean by shiftless? That Alexander Kinross stuck to nothing? If he was shiftless, would he even be there to meet her at journey's end?

"Elizabeth, come inside!" James was shouting.

Obedient, Elizabeth ran.

AS THE DAYS flew by they conspired to give Elizabeth little time for reflection; try as she did to stay awake in her bed and think about her fate, the moment she lay down, sleep claimed her. Every day saw quarrels between James and Mary; Alastair, away to the mill at dawn and not returning until after dark, was fortunate. All of Mary's own furniture had to be moved to her new residence, and took precedence over James's chipped, battered pieces. If Elizabeth wasn't running up and down the stairs with armloads of linens or clothing (including shoes) or on one end of the piano, the bureau, the chiffer-robe, she was outside with one of Mary's rugs spread over the clothesline, beating it within an inch of its life. Mary was a cousin on the Murray side, and had come to her marriage with a certain amount of property, a small allowance from her farmer father, and more independence of mind than Elizabeth had credited any woman could possess. None of which had impinged on her in the way it did after Mary came to live with Father. Who didn't always win the battles, she was amazed to discover. The jam stayed on the breakfast table every morning and was there again every night. The children's shoes went on their feet before service at Dr. Murray's kirk on Sundays. And Mary flirted her shapely ankles in a pair of exquisite blue kid slippers with heels high enough to turn her walk into a mince. James spent much of his time in towering rages and soon had his grandchildren in healthy fear of his stick, but Alastair, he was learning, had become putty in Mary's hands.

Elizabeth's only chance to avoid this domestic turmoil were visits to Miss MacTavish's establishment in Kinross's main square. It was a small house whose front parlor, opening straight on to the pavement, bore a big glass window in which stood a sexless dummy clad in a very full-skirted pink taffeta dress-it would never do to offend the kirk by showing a dummy with breasts.

Everyone who didn't make her own clothing went to see Miss MacTavish, an attenuated spinster lady in her late forties, who, upon inheriting a hundred pounds, had given up employment as a seamstress and opened her own business as a modiste. It and she had prospered, for Kinross contained women able to afford her services, and she was clever enough to produce magazines of ladies' fashions that she insisted were sent to her from London.

Five of Elizabeth's twenty pounds had gone on tartan wools from the mill, where Alastair's position allowed her a small but welcome discount. These and four house dresses in coarse brown linen she would craft herself, together with her unbleached calico drawers, nightgowns, chemises and petticoats. When the expenditure was totted up, she found that she had sixteen pounds left to spend with Miss MacTavish.

"Two morning gowns, two afternoon gowns, two evening gowns and your wedding dress," said Miss MacTavish, enchanted with this commission. She wouldn't make much of a profit on the exercise, but it wasn't every day that a young and very pretty girl-oh, such a figure!-was thrust into Miss MacTavish's hands without a mother or an aunt to spoil her fun.

"As well," the modiste chattered as she wielded her tape measure, "that I am here, Elizabeth. Were you to go to Kirkaldy or Dumfermline, you'd pay twice as much for half as much. And I have some lovely materials in stock, just right for your coloring. Dark beauties never go out of fashion, they don't fade into their surroundings. Though I hear that your sister Jean-now there was a fair beauty!-is still the toast of Edinburgh."

Staring at herself in Miss MacTavish's mirror, Elizabeth heard only the last part of this. James wouldn't brook a mirror in his house and had won that particular encounter with Mary, who, when James produced Dr. Murray as reinforcements, was obliged to keep her mirror in her own bedroom. Beauty, Elizabeth sensed, was a word that tripped easily off Miss MacTavish's tongue, and served as a balm to soothe a customer's misgivings. Certainly she saw no sign of beauty in her reflection, though "dark" was accurate enough. Very dark hair, thick dark brows and lashes, dark eyes, an ordinary sort of face.

"Och, your skin!" Miss MacTavish was crooning. "So white, and quite flawless! But do not let anybody plaster you with rouge, it would ruin your style. A neck like a swan!"

The measuring done, Elizabeth was led into the room wherein Miss MacTavish's bolts of fabrics were arranged on shelves-the finest muslins, cambrics, silks, taffetas, laces, velvets, satins. Spools of ribbon in every color. Feathers, silk flowers.

Elizabeth sped straight to a bolt of brilliant red, face alight. "This one, Miss MacTavish!" she cried. "This one!"

The seamstress-turned-modiste went as red as the cloth. "Och, dear me, no," she said, voice constricted.

"But it's so beautiful!"

"Scarlet," said Miss MacTavish, shoving the offending bolt to the back of its shelf, "is not the done thing at all, my dear Elizabeth. I keep it for a certain element in my clientele whose-er-virtue is not what it should be. Naturally they come to me at a prearranged hour to spare embarrassment. You know your scripture, child-the 'scarlet woman'?"

"Ohhhh!"

So the closest to scarlet that Elizabeth came was a rust-red taffeta. Irreproachable.

"I don't think," she said to Miss MacTavish over a cup of tea after the choices had been made, "that Father will approve of any of these dresses. I won't look my station."

"Your station," said Miss MacTavish strongly, "is about to change with a vengeance, Elizabeth. You can't go as the bride of a man rich enough to send you a thousand pounds wearing naught but tartan from the mill and plain brown linen. There will be parties, balls, I imagine, carriage rides, calls to pay on the wives of other rich men. Your father ought not to have kept so much of what, I am sure, is your money, not his."

That said (for it had burned to be said-what a miserable old skinflint James Drummond was!), Miss MacTavish poured more tea and pressed a cake on Elizabeth. Such a beautiful girl, and so wasted in Kinross!

"I really don't want to go to New South Wales and marry Mr. Kinross," Elizabeth said unhappily.

"Nonsense! Think of it as an adventure, my dear. There's not a young woman in Kinross who doesn't envy you, believe me. Think about it. Here, you will not enjoy a husband at all, you will spend your best years looking after your father." Her pale blue eyes moistened. "I know, believe me. I had to look after my mother until she died, and by then my hopes of marriage were gone." Suddenly she sighed, beamed. "Alexander Drummond! Well do I remember him! Barely fifteen when he ran away, but there wasn't a female in Kinross hadn't noticed him."

Stiffening, Elizabeth realized that at last she had found someone who could tell her a little about her husband-to-be. Unlike James, Duncan Drummond had had but two children, a girl, Winifred, and Alexander. Winifred had married a minister and gone to live near Inverness before Elizabeth had been born, so that was her best chance gone. Quizzing those of her own family old enough to remember Alexander had produced curiously little; as if, for some reason, the subject of Alexander was forbidden. Father, she realized. Father didn't want to give back his windfall, and was taking no chances. He also believed that ignorance was bliss when it came to marriage.

"Was he handsome?" she asked eagerly.

"Handsome?" Miss MacTavish screwed up her face, shut her eyes. "No, I wouldn't have called him handsome. It was the way he walked-a swagger. He was always black-and-blue from Duncan's stick, so sometimes it must have been hard to walk as if he owned the world, but he did. And his smile! One just went-weak."

"He ran away?"

"On his fifteenth birthday," said Miss MacTavish, and proceeded to give her version of the story. "Dr. MacGregor-he was the outgoing minister-was quite heartbroken. Alexander, he used to say, was so terribly clever. He had Latin and Greek, and Dr. MacGregor hoped to send him to university. But Duncan wouldn't have that. There was a job for him in the mill here in Kinross, and with Winifred away, Duncan wanted Alexander here. A hard man, was Duncan Drummond! He'd offered for me, you know, but there was Mother to care for, so I wasn't sorry to refuse his offer. And now you're to marry Alexander! It's like a dream, Elizabeth, it's just like a dream!"

That last remark was true. In what corners of her mind the constant hard work permitted her, Elizabeth thought about her future much as clouds passed across the high, wide Scottish sky; sometimes in airy, lighthearted wisps, sometimes sad and grey, sometimes stormily black. An unknown severance with unknown consequences, and the limited ken in which she had spent her barely sixteen years could offer her neither comfort nor information. A tiny thrill of excitement would be followed by a bout of tears, a spurt of joy by a dizzying descent into despond. Even after intense perusal of Dr. Murray's gazetteer and Britannica, poor Elizabeth had no yardstick whereby to measure this complete and drastic upheaval.

THE DRESSES got made, including her wedding dress, every item folded between sheets of tissue paper and packed in her two trunks. Alastair presented her with the trunks, Mary with a veil of white French lace to wear at her wedding, Miss MacTavish with a pair of white satin slippers; all the members of the family save James managed to find something to give her, be it Cologne water, a scrimshaw brooch, a pin cushion or a box of bonbons.

James's respectable Presbyterian married couple answered one of his advertisements from Peebles, and after several letters had traveled back and forth between Kinross and Peebles, said that, for fifty pounds, they would be pleased to take custody of the bride.

Alastair and Mary were deputed to take Elizabeth on the coach to Kirkaldy, where they boarded a steam packet for the journey across the Firth of Forth to Leith. From there several horse-drawn trams took them into Edinburgh and to Princes Street Station, where Mr. and Mrs. Richard Watson would be waiting.

Had she not been felled by the choppy ferry crossing, Elizabeth would have been agog; in all her life she had never been as far afield as Kirkaldy, so the huge city of Edinburgh ought to have transfixed her, if her delight at seeing Kirkaldy was anything to go by. Catherine and Robert lived there and had put them up, shown Elizabeth the sights. But she could summon up no enthusiasm for Edinburgh's bustle, its wintry beauty, wooded hills and ravines. When the last of the trams deposited them at the North British Railway station, she let Alastair guide her, install her in the tiny, boxlike second-class compartment she was to share with the Watsons all the way to London, and left him to search the jam-packed platform for her tardy chaperones.

"This is quite tolerable," said Mary, gazing about. "The seats are well padded, and you've your rug for warmth."

"It's the third-class passengers I don't envy," Alastair said, pushing two cardboard chits into Elizabeth's left glove. "Don't lose them, they're for your trunks, safely in the luggage compartment." Then he slipped five gold coins down inside her other glove. "From Father," he said with a grin. "I managed to convince him that you can't go all the way to New South Wales with an empty purse, but I'm to tell you not to waste a farthing."

The Watsons finally arrived, breathless. They were a tall and angular couple in shabby clothes that suggested Elizabeth's fifty pounds had promoted them from the horrors of third-class to the relative comfort of second-class. They seemed pleasant, though Alastair's nose wrinkled at the liquor on Mr. Watson's breath.

Whistles blew, people hung out of the carriage windows to exchange screams, tears, frantic clutches and final waves with those on the platform; amid huffs and explosions, clouds of steam, jerks and clangs, the London night train began to move.

So near, and yet so far, thought Elizabeth, eyelids drooping; my sister Jean, who started all of this, lives in Princes Street. Yet Alastair and Mary have to hire a room in the railway hotel, and will go back to Kinross without so much as setting eyes on her. "I am not receiving," her curt note had said.

The eyelids fell, she crashed into sleep sitting curled in one corner with her cheek against the icy window.

"Poor little thing," said Mrs. Watson. "Help me make her more comfortable, Richard. It is a sad state of affairs when Scotland has to send its children twelve thousand miles to find a husband."