

# Prologue

1845

The castle of the Earl of Doune, the Highlands of Scotland

The sound of the gunshot echoing around the stone keep of Doune Castle woke the ten-year-old William Stewart from his bed way up in the nursery. The noise jolted him from sleep and left him confused and disoriented, until another such blast rang out again.

That time he heard his mother screaming.

William had to save his mother; no matter that he was a small, skinny child and that the drunken madman with the gun was no doubt his terrifying father, the Earl of Doune, he *had* to save his mother.

William threw back the covers and scrambled out of bed, slipping out of the nursery and running as fast as he could down the stairs that led from the nursery to the rest of the castle. He didn't pass any servants on the way; his old nanny was too deaf to hear the commotion, and the rest of the staff slept in another wing of the castle.

He skidded to a halt at the top of the flight of stairs that really belonged in a grand Austrian schloss or a French chateau, not a badly designed castle in the foothills of the Cairngorm Mountains of Highland Scotland. The stairs rose, with carved mahogany banisters inlaid with other rare and expensive woods, from the main entrance to the castle, twenty feet in the air, up to the first floor of the castle, where they branched off from each other. Each side of the staircase rose another twenty feet to the second floor, where the staircases branched again up to the third floor, creating an effect not unlike the proud horns of the stags that the Doune earls hunted across their ancestral lands.

From William's point of view at the top of one of the third floor branches, he could see his father trying to reload his pistol as his mother tugged at his arm, desperate to stop him shooting again. In horror, William saw the body of a man lying slumped on the stairs, suspiciously still.

"You shot him!" his mother cried, still struggling with his father. "You killed him, you bastard, you killed him!"

His father stopped trying to reload the gun long enough to give his mother a slap across the face strong enough to send her reeling into the nearest wall. The sound of flesh meeting flesh made William want to be sick; the sound of his mother's tears ignited his anger.

How dare his father raise his hand to his mother? Where was the honour in such a cowardly gesture?

William started down the staircase in front of him, anxious to reach his mother before she could be struck again.

"I had every right to shoot him!" his father screamed, his face red with whisky and hatred. "He was stealing my wife away! He wouldn't stand and face me like a man, so I shot him in the back like the coward that he was!"

"He wasn't stealing me; I was leaving you!" his mother said with a hiss, edging away from his father and making her way towards the opposite side of the stairs that William was currently moving down.

"You can't leave me; you're my *wife*!" his father bellowed, starting towards his mother.

“I’m going, and I’m taking William with me!” his mother shouted back, running up the stairs in earnest. “You’re a vicious beast, and I’m not going to live with your cruelty anymore!”

William skidded to a stop, realising that he was on the wrong side of the huge ornamental staircase. He needed to reverse course and join his mother on the other side of the great keep, to offer her all the protection that he could.

However, his father, despite being encumbered by drink, had gained ground on his mother and had grabbed the back of the dark green travelling dress she wore. She screamed and turned to claw at his face, making his father roar in anger and shake her. She must have hurt his father in some way, perhaps with a lucky strike to his eyes, because his father let out another bellow of pain and hit his mother again.

That time, however, his mother was standing next to a waist-high balustrade, which was not tall enough to support her when she was flung against it. Ten-year-old William was forced to watch in horror as his mother flailed helplessly at thin air before she toppled backwards and fell twenty feet to the hard, cold flagstone floor below.

William must have made some noise then—he might even have screamed; he could not remember later. All he could remember was the noise of the servants rushing into the keep, the horrified gasps of the maids, and the heavy hand of the butler on his shoulder. His father had slumped to the floor on the opposite staircase muttering, “She fell, she fell,” over and over again.

Drummond, the butler, carried William back up the stairs, away from the terrible scene. The last view he had of his mother was of her body being covered respectfully by several footmen using one of the tapestries from the wall. His nanny was woken up, and she forced William to drink something vile that would make him sleep. He didn’t want to sleep; he cried out for his mother, he tried to tell his nanny that his father had killed her, but the old woman merely gave him more of the sleeping draught until he passed out.

He woke late the next day, the mid-morning sunlight piercing through the gaps in the nursery curtains. His head felt fuzzy and there was a hollow ache in his stomach. He had slept far past his usual breakfast time. For a moment, he was confused about why he was in bed so late, but then he saw the suitable set of clothes his nanny had laid out for him, all in mourning black.

The knowledge hit him like a cannonball to the chest; his beloved mother was dead, and his father had been the man to kill her.

He wept, then, bitter, hot angry tears for the mother he loved with all the desperate devotion of a small boy. Her loss was all-encompassing, and the desire to clamber back under his covers was very strong, indeed. He gave in to the urge, spending more than an hour sobbing into his pillow, inconsolable with grief.

Eventually, however, his tears ran dry. There were only so many tears in his small body, after all. Bitterness replaced sadness; fury replaced tears. There was only one thing to do. He must confront his father, the murderer of his beloved mother.

He dressed as quickly as could in the unfamiliar clothes, calling for old Mrs Montrose, his nanny, but she was not in her small bedroom next to the nursery. The clock on the mantelpiece struck eleven; his tutor should have been leading him through his mathematics, but he hadn’t come to rouse him from his bed, either. William checked the schoolroom, down the corridor from the nursery. There was no Mr Douglas there. Mr Douglas’ bedroom was on the floor below, but that was empty, too. Too empty, William noticed, puzzled; he had been in there once or twice, and had seen Mr Douglas’ books and papers scattered haphazardly over his desk. All the books were missing, making the room seem a lot emptier. The door to the wardrobe was hanging open, and it, too, was empty.

Where had Mr Douglas gone?

William decided to go downstairs to find out what was happening. The first thing he noticed was the quiet of the place. Doune Castle was large, but there were always maids bustling about the place cleaning and footmen standing on duty at the doors to the drawing room and his father's study. They were nowhere to be seen. He hesitantly went to the spot where his mother had landed, but her body had been taken somewhere else. The flagstones had been heavily scrubbed and William could smell the strong bleaching powder the maids used to clean the floors. No trace of blood remained there or over by the door where the body of the man his father had shot had fallen. It was like the horrors of the night before had never happened, except that the itchy black shirt he was wearing was proof that it had.

He had slept past breakfast time, but there were no maids setting the table for luncheon in the dining room. He wandered from room to room, looking for anybody to tell him what was going on, but there were no servants to be found anywhere. The whole castle seemed still and empty; no fires had been lit as usual in the fireplaces of the library or the drawing room. William hunted further for signs of life, even daring to go as far as his father's study and peer around the heavy oak door, but his father was not there. The gun that had shot the man the night before was there, though, thrown carelessly into an armchair by the unlit fire. Empty claret bottles lay like fallen soldiers on the great desk, dribbles of their contents staining the papers there, leaving their bloodstains on letters and account books.

Church bells rang out suddenly, in great doleful peals. It wasn't Sunday, so this confused William. He went to a window of the study that looked out over the walls of the castle and down the hill to the small church where generations of his ancestors had been christened, married, and buried. A stream of black-clad people was pouring from the church like ants, a whole line of them coming back up the hill towards the castle. As they got nearer, William picked out a few familiar faces—Drummond, the butler, who had carried him away from the stairs the previous night, Nanny, who was being steadied over an uneven path by Fergus, a very tall footman who always turned a blind eye to William's naughty habit of sliding down the banisters of the staircase and jumping off at the end.

It was a funeral, he realised, his mother's funeral, and he hadn't been told of it. He was overcome by grief as the reality of his situation hit him properly—his mother was dead, and she wasn't coming back. His father had been the one to kill her, in one of his drunken rages.

Everybody in Doune Castle knew about the earl's bad temper. Maids tiptoed around the west wing of the castle, desperate not to catch his attention. William knew never to do anything that would attract his father's notice, as he could never be sure how his father's unpredictable moods would affect him. His mother had showered William with affection, often spending whole afternoons with him upstairs in the schoolroom in an attempt to show him that one of his parents loved him. She'd had to be careful not to let her husband discover that she was doing this, as he often took his temper out on her. She blamed her bruises on stumbles and slippery floors, but even William, at his young age, knew that his father was to blame.

William had hated his father for as long as he could remember. Now that he had seen him murder his mother, he finally had a reason to voice his hatred.

Heavy footsteps sounded down the corridor. The door was thrown open, slamming against the door frame.

"Boy!" his father barked. "What in hell's name are you doing in here?"

"I—I—didn't know where anyone was," William stuttered, hating the way his voice sounded high-pitched and weak.

“Where do you think we were? We were burying your mother,” the earl said shortly, bypassing William directly for the whisky decanter on the other side of the room.

From the stench of alcohol that followed him, he hadn’t stopped drinking from the night before.

“But—but—I didn’t say goodbye,” William said, hearing his voice break with the tears that started to slide down his face.

He had not cried them all away, it seemed. He tried to wipe his face, but his father had turned from the decanter and caught him in the shameful act.

A heavy cuff from one of the earl’s powerful hands sent William reeling into a bookcase.

“Don’t you dare cry, boy,” the earl warned, his voice slurring heavily. “No son of mine cries like a baby.”

A tiny little fire started to burn deep in William’s belly. He didn’t love this man; how could he, for all that he was his father? He was a drunk and a bully, and he had killed the only person who truly loved William.

“You killed her,” he said with as much menace as he could muster. “You killed my mother!”

The earl’s head snapped up, and he snarled at William like a huge drunken dog.

“The silly bitch fell!” the earl said, his hand flexing tightly around his whisky glass.

“She fell because you pushed her over the banister!” William shouted, his anger building inside him, that little fire burning brighter and hotter. “You’re a murderer, and I’ll tell everybody what I saw!”

The earl’s whisky glass came hurtling past William’s ear and smashed against the bookcase. A fragment of the heavy crystal struck William on the temple, and he could feel the warm blood start to pour down his face.

“You’ll say nothing, because nobody will believe you!” the earl said, rounding his desk clumsily and staggering towards William. “I am the earl here, and you’re nothing but a stupid little weakling boy!”

“I’ll tell the vicar—and the constable!” William shouted, dodging out of his father’s clumsy grab for him. “I’ll tell the whole village you killed her, when all she wanted to do was leave you!”

“Tell them!” the earl bellowed. “Tell them that your whore of a mother was planning to run away with a servant and live in sin!”

His words were ugly spears that struck William’s heart.

“She was not!” he screamed, running at his father, kicking and slapping at him in his rage. “Don’t you say that; don’t you say that!”

His father lashed out and caught William with a backhanded slap that sent him stunned to the floor.

“Everyone knows what a whore she was, spreading her legs for some nobody of a tutor!” his father roared. “She deserved everything she got. I should have done it before!”

William didn’t really remember what happened next; later on, as he lay in his bed, he heard his nanny talking in shocked whispers to a maid.

“Fergus heard the to-do and went in to the study to find young Master William screaming and shouting and trying to beat his father with his little hands. Bleeding he was, all over the place, and the earl going for him like he was a grown man! Shocking, I call it!”

“The earl *beat* Master William?” the maid said, shocked.

“Covered in bruises, the poor lad. It took two footmen and the butler to pull the earl off him. Drunk, of course.”

“It’s not right!” the maid said, scandalised.

“Course it’s not right,” his nanny said scornfully. “What sort of man attacks a wee child like that?”

“You know what they say about Lady Elizabeth,” the maid said archly. “How her fall wasn’t such of an accident.”

“You’d better not let anybody hear you talking like that,” the nanny warned. “You’ll be out without references, and nobody will take you on.”

“The whole of Tomintoul is talking about it!” the maid said, affronted at being chided.

“Dying at midnight and buried at eight o’clock the next morning! It’s a disgrace how quickly that poor woman was put into the ground, with not even one member of her family there to say goodbye!”

“Well, she didn’t have much family, poor soul,” his nanny sighed.

“Just an old aunt, I think. Nobody ever came to visit, and she didn’t go to stay. There wouldn’t have been anybody to say goodbye to her, apart from Master William, and he shouldn’t have had to see that.”

“Poor wee lad,” the maid said, sounding sad. “His mam dead and his father a drunken beast. What chance has he got?”

No chance, William realised, the cold truth of his situation creeping over him. He could not remain in the house, not living with the man who had murdered his mother, who would get away with it because he was the Earl of Doune and there was nobody to gainsay him. William could tell whomever he liked about what had really happened, and nobody would believe him. Or they would believe him, he realised, but be unable to do anything about it.

He could not stay there.

He didn’t know anything about his mother’s side of the family, but his nanny had mentioned an aunt, hadn’t she? His great-aunt, that would be. He didn’t know anything about her, except that his mother must have written to her. She would spend hours every day writing letters. Her aunt must have been one of the people she wrote to.

His nanny came over to him then, clucking over finding him awake. She gave him more of the ghastly sleeping draught, and he gave in to the various aches and pains coursing through his body.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow, he would find his aunt’s direction from one of his mother’s letters and go to her.

Anybody, any place, would be better than Doune Castle with his father.