

Chapter One

Her birth coincided with that of the twentieth century, the first freezing night of the 1st January, 1900. A time when Queen Victoria, Empress of India, Grandmother of Europe was on the throne of England and residing in Osbourne House on the Isle of Wight.

Her Majesty was seated at her desk reading a report concerning the siege at Mafeking. She lifted her eyelids. Disconsolately she gazed into the glowing coals of the fire deeply worried about the Boer War. Behind her, through the thick plush velvet curtains and shuttered windows overlooking her wintry rose garden, across the grim and melancholy waves of the swelling Solent, over the mudflats and salt marshes of Lymington Spit, a light shone in a farmhouse window, from within came the unmistakable cries of a new-born baby.

“It’s a lassie!” exclaimed Annie Oliphant, gathering up the babe.

The exhausted mother shut her eyes. “Don’t ...don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

Annie was not a professional midwife, simply a woman of good sense and kindness of heart who, in a modest way, enjoyed nursing, and in matters relating to pregnancy and childbirth, which, at that time, was fraught with danger and mystery, carried a certain authority. She’d been prepared for a reaction of this sort from the mother, but marvelling at the birth of a bairn as perfect as this, her emotions had taken over. *How can any woman deny*

such a helpless wee lassie like this? “But she’s beautiful!” she said.

“Take it away,” gasped the mother. “Please,” she pleaded. “You promised.”

Determinedly ignoring the mother’s eye, the square-jawed Scots girl cleaned the bawling infant and bundled it up in swaddling clothes. “What a treasure!” The baby quietened down. “There now, y’see.”

“I can’t keep her,” anguished the mother. “You know I can’t.”

“Come along, I never heard of such a thing. A new-born baby is the most blessed gift in the world. Especially a bonnie love like this.” The mother turned away in torment. Tenderly Annie placed the baby beside her. “Hush now. Just for a while.”

“Oh, God, this is torture. We had an agreement, Annie.”

“Just look at those blue eyes.” Annie waited a moment, but the mother remained motionless. “Get to know her while I clean things up,” she said, and she went about her business.

Alone, the mother reluctantly turned to look at her new-born. Tentatively she lowered the swaddling clothes to see its face. With the back of her finger she made to caress its cheek. Abruptly she checked herself. “Annie!” she called. “For God’s sake, take it away!”

Outside the door Annie was hoping the mother would relent. Re-entering, she took the babe without a word and left the room.

The mother mutely sobbed.

Five minutes later, the former nursemaid bustled in again with a cheerful, “Here we are now. Have a nice cup of tea. Are we feeling any better?”

“Oh, Annie, don’t,” groaned the young woman. “Stop. Please.”

Annie’s smile faded. She placed the saucer and teacup – from her best china tea-set – onto the bedside table. “Have a sleep,” she murmured, “and in the morning Fred will drive you home in the trap.”

“I must give you some money,” said the woman reaching for her reticule.

“Leave all that. Settle up with him later. Just you rest easy now.” Tidying the bed covers she confided, “And don’t you worry yourself. No one will know. I promise you.”

The mother stretched out her hand.

Annie clasped it. “No one.” With her free hand she smoothed away the damp locks of hair from the mother’s brow. “There, now. Just you rest easy.”

“I’ll never be able to thank you. I’ll see you’re not the loser.”

Annie handed her the saucer. “Here, drink your tea.” Lifting the oil lamp she observed, “You’ll have the light from the fire. Sleep now,” and closing the door she left.

Noiselessly entering her own bedroom next door, she shielded the lamp light from the bed in the corner where, side by side, her two-year-old twin sons lay sleeping. The new-born baby was mewling in a washing basket on Annie’s double bed. She set down the oil lamp and leaned over to look at her. *What on earth am I to do with you? I wonder who your Dadda was?* The baby opened its eyes. Annie smiled. “Well, hallo,” she whispered. The baby gurgled, chomped its mouth, blinked and went back to sleep. Deliberating, Annie turned away. Pushing aside the cambric curtain and limp Nottingham lace covering the window, she gazed into the dark. Gusts of rain pelted the window pane. *We’re hardly able to make ends meet as it is. Fred will throw a fit. Still, he’s a bairn himself, bless him, he’ll do what he’s told. ‘You’ll not be the loser’, she said. How much will she pay?* Distant thunder rumbled. Suddenly a bolt of lightning flashed from behind giant black clouds, illuminating a vast and forbidding heaven. *God is angry. ‘Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not.’ Mark 10, verse 14.* Searching the sky for a happier portent, she spotted a solitary morning star in the east. As a sign, it was good

enough. Turning to the oak chest beside her sleeping boys she opened the top drawer. She removed a cardboard box and hairbrush, and padded down the clothes inside. Taking the baby from the basket, she placed it inside the open drawer. Then, collecting the oil lamp and basket, she opened the bedroom door. Looking back at the downy sleeping heads of her twins, a flicker of maternal joy warmed her unlovely doughy face. Silently she closed the door and went downstairs.

“What!?” cried Fred in the parlour, raising his black caterpillar eyebrows. “Another mouth to feed! Are you mad, woman? Tell her to look after her own brats. You never said naught to me about keeping it. What’s in it for us, eh? How much is she gonna pay us?”

“Ask her yourself when you drive her home,” Annie instructed her husband, as she cleared the table.

“I bloody will,” he retorted, biting his fingernail and flinging his leg over the arm of the armchair. Fred was a wiry, athletic little man, younger than his buxom wife, with thick shiny black hair growing in curls round his ears, dark gypsy eyes and a dazzling white-toothed smile which belied a character that would gladly have cheated his best friend of sixpence.

“Ask her two guineas a week. And payable to me, mind. None of y’ slipping it into y’ own back pocket.” Annie was sharp about money, too, or as her Ma used to say to her, “Y’ short arms don’t reach y’ long pockets.”

Fred guffawed in disbelief. “Two guineas! G’arn! She’ll never pay that much.”

“To buy our silence?” Shrewdly Annie regarded her husband. “Oh yes, she will.”

And indeed she did. Every month eight golden guineas wrapped in tissue paper arrived in a thick velum envelope