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Secrets in Prior's Ford

Eve Houston

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Extract

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SPHERE

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Author's Note

As Naomi wisely says in this book, it is not possible to lose friends – only to lose those you mistakenly thought were friends.

So I want to take this opportunity to thank all the true friends who have stayed the course with me, and who always have been and always will be there for me, no matter what. You are pure dead brilliant, every one of you, and I will love you all, always.

Eve Houston

The Setting for the Prior's Ford Books

Dumfries and Galloway, the southernmost county in Scotland, is an area of some of the most beautiful countryside to be found in the UK. It is rich in wildlife, and its hills and valleys are scattered with farmland, attractive villages and towns of architectural beauty as well as abbeys, castles and great houses and gardens bearing witness to its long history.

It is a land of lochs, streams and rivers, and its southernmost border is the wild and magnificent Solway Firth. Dumfries and Galloway, in short, has everything.

What better place to set a book?

For more information, visit *www.visitdumfriesandgalloway.co.uk*.

Main Characters

Glen and Libby Mason – landlord and landlady of the Neurotic Cuckoo

Ingrid MacKenzie – owns the Gift Horse gift shop and tearoom, lives on Mill Walk estate with husband **Peter** and daughters **Freya** and **Ella**

Jenny Forsyth – lives on Mill Walk estate with husband **Andrew** and son **Calum**

Helen Campbell – lives on Slaemuir housing scheme with husband **Duncan** and their four children **Gregor**, **Gemma**, **Lachlan** and **Irene**

Clarissa Ramsay – newcomer to the village, widow, lives in Willow Cottage

The Rev. Naomi Hennessey – Church of Scotland minister, lives in the manse with her godson **Ethan**

Alastair Marshall – artist and general jack of all trades, lives in a farm cottage on the edge of Prior's Ford

Marcy Copleton and Sam Brennan – run the village store and post office together, live in Rowan Cottage

Hector and Fliss Ralston-Kerr – the local laird and his wife, live in dilapidated Linn Hall with their son **Lewis**

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Saul Beckett steered the well-used and seldom-washed Land Rover along the road from Kirkcudbright, not even noticing the green lushness of the fields only to be found in Dumfries and Galloway on cold February days. Nor was he interested in the ewes, fat and woolly and resembling a small child's drawing, placidly grazing as they awaited the arrival of their lambs.

Saul was a man with a mission, a townie who had never found the countryside beguiling.

He passed the end of the lane that led up to Tarbethill Farm and only slowed down once he came to the village of Prior's Ford, cruising slowly along Main Street, past the village hall on his right and the primary school on his left, its playground busy with children enjoying their afternoon break.

He was looking out for the village inn, the Neurotic Cuckoo, but just as he reached the half-moon-shaped village green by the side of the village hall his attention was taken by three young women, each carrying a big cardboard box,

waiting to cross the road. Saul braked and waved them across with a gallant flourish of one arm.

The three women smiled at him as they hurried in front of his bonnet, unaware that the polite stranger was on a mission that would soon throw their quiet little village into chaos and set neighbour against neighbour. Saul nodded in return, eyeing them idly. Two were all right, he decided: one small, with long brown hair that she kept trying to flick back with tosses of the head, while the other was taller, with fair, well-cut hair forming a neat frame for her pretty face. But the third woman was the one who captured his interest – tall, slim and an incredibly beautiful blonde.

'*You're* more than welcome, darlin',' he murmured as she smiled at him, 'any time at all!' And he let the engine idle for a moment so he could watch the gorgeous blonde and her friends walk across the village green.

It was as he followed their progress that Saul noticed the local pub, his destination, at the centre of the crescent.

He had passed the turning to the crescent without realising it, but fortunately it opened on to Main Street at the other end as well. Saul put the Land Rover into gear and moved off. As he made the turn and headed towards the pub, he saw the blonde and her friends enter a neat little shop with a sign above the door proclaiming it to be the Gift Horse. Pity, that, he thought. It would have been nice if they had been making for the pub, same as he was.

'What a gentlemanly man,' Ingrid MacKenzie said to her two friends as they made their way towards the Gift Horse. 'Nice of him to stop for us.'

'For you, I think.' Helen Campbell winked at Jenny Forsyth, who grinned back at her.

'Why for me? There were three of us.'

'It's that hair – and your height. And the way you carry yourself.' Helen tossed her long brown hair back from her face as best she could, with her arms full. 'He could tell you used to be a glamorous model.' Nobody could ever think that of her, she knew. Mother of four, once slim but now a little on the plump side; she could best be described as 'homely'.

'No, no, I haven't modelled for years. He saw only that I was a housewife and mother, like you and Jenny. Here . . .' Ingrid dumped her box on top of Jenny's. 'Hold that for a moment while I get my key.'

'I can't see!'

'There is nothing to look at,' Ingrid replied calmly as she took the key from her pocket and unlocked the door. Then, retrieving the box, 'There, now you can see again. Come in and I will make you some coffee.'

Jenny and Helen followed her in obediently. There was something about Ingrid – possibly her air of serenity – that marked her as a leader. The two of them had already been good friends when Ingrid, who had left her career and Scandinavia for love of a Scotsman, settled in Prior's Ford with her husband Peter and their daughters, Freya and Ella. Jenny and Helen had set out to make the newcomer feel at home, and when Ingrid opened her gift shop and tearoom some three years earlier, Jenny, who shared her interest in crafts, had gone into business with her. Helen helped by keeping records of the items sold in the shop, which was open during the spring and summer tourist season.

'I thought it would have been colder in here, given how cold it is outside.' Jenny unwound the crimson scarf from around her neck and unfastened her coat, then fluffed up her fair, well-cut hair with the tips of her fingers.

'I switched the heating on this morning. We can't work

in the cold.' Ingrid emptied her box of coloured cards, reels of ribbon and plastic envelopes filled with tiny pieces of coloured foam in all sort of shapes, on to one of the three small tables provided for visitors in search of light refreshments, while Jenny, hanging her coat on the back of a chair, lifted two rosy-cheeked rag dolls dressed in brightly patterned frocks from the box she had brought.

'What d'you think?' She held them aloft. 'I finished them last night.'

'Very nice; they'll be sure to sell well,' Ingrid said approvingly, while Helen, discarding the craft and exercise books she had produced from her box, reached for one of the dolls.

'They're gorgeous, Jenny.' She held the doll up, smiling into its cheerful little face. 'She makes you feel happy just looking at her.'

'What a nice thing to say!'

'It's true. She'll bring happiness to whoever buys her.' Just as Jenny herself did, Helen thought. She was a caring person who never had a bad word to say about anyone. Helen had been born and raised in Prior's Ford, as had her husband, Duncan, while Jenny and Andrew Forsyth had settled in the village a few months before the birth of their only child, Calum. Jenny never spoke about her past and Helen had never pried, though there were times when she glimpsed an inner sadness in her friend's hazel eyes and a droop to her generous, normally smiling mouth, and suspected that life had not always been as kind to Jenny as it was now.

'I wish I could make things like that,' she said as she laid the doll down gently.

'No you don't, because we need your efficient mind,' Ingrid told her. 'You're so good at making lists of all the things we have, and the things we still need.'

'Just you wait until I publish my bestseller – I'll be too busy writing the next one to do your lists for you,' Helen teased. She was taking a correspondence course on creative writing, and it was her burning ambition to become a novelist. 'Not that you need to worry about that, because it'll never happen,' she added.

'Yes it will, though you have to stop telling us and yourself that it won't,' Jenny remarked.

'What's the point in kidding myself?' The demands of a husband, a house and four children, together with the typing she did for people in order to make a little money, left her with very little time to spare for her own writing. She heaved a sigh without even realising that she was doing it, and her shoulders drooped.

Her friends glanced at each other, then Ingrid said, 'Every day and in every way, I am getting better and better. You must say that to yourself every morning, Helen.'

'Before or after making sure the children have got up and got washed and dressed and eaten breakfast and collected everything they need for school?'

'One day they'll fly the nest and you'll have more time. Until then, you should learn to be more positive,' Ingrid scolded her, and then, studying Helen, her head on one side, she added, 'It must be something to do with your Scottish winters – my Peter can feel low at times, just like you, but I tell him I won't be bothered with that. When you write your bestselling book, Jenny and I will pile copies in the window and nobody will be allowed out of the shop without buying one. Now,' she delved into her box and produced a bottle, 'I borrowed some of Peter's best whisky, so we can each have a tot in our coffee. That should cheer you up!'

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'It'll do me well enough,' Saul Beckett said when he had followed the landlord up the narrow stairs to inspect one of the two rooms available for visitors to the Neurotic Cuckoo. 'D'you want a deposit?'

'I'll trust you,' Glen Mason told him amiably, eyeing the other's holdall, his only luggage. 'Staying long?'

'A few days, probably no more than that.'

'Holiday, is it?'

'Mmm.' The ceiling sloped, which meant Saul had to stoop to look out of the window at the village green and Main Street beyond. On the opposite side of the street he could see the local church, the village store, a butcher's shop and a greengrocer's and flower shop. A road leading off the street directly across from the pub gave him a glimpse of the river and the soft, rolling hills that the district of Dumfries and Galloway was famed for.

'Not a very big place, this.'

'Larger than you might think,' Glen said. 'There's a good few houses fitted in between the river and the shops across there, council housing behind the school, and a private housing estate behind the church. I always say, show a developer a few feet of ground these days and he'll manage to build a house on it.' He chuckled at his own wit.

'You're not from here, are you?'

Glen leaned back against the doorjamb, his thumbs hooked into his braces. He was in his late fifties, a tall well-built man who enjoyed talking, an asset for any pub landlord. And by his way of it, he was interested in folk though his wife, Libby, called it nosiness. 'Birmingham area. Me and the missus had a corner shop all our married life, then we got fed up with the city so we decided to look for somewhere nice and quiet. We'd always fancied running a pub, so here we are. Been here for – oh, must be comin' up for

eight years now. We've never regretted makin' the move, and never will. This place is the answer to all our dreams.'

'It that so?' said the man who was about to shatter Glen Mason's dream, and the new life he had so carefully created for himself. 'Prior's Ford – where did that name come from?'

'There was a priory here hundreds of years ago – you'll see the ruins if you go out of the village in that direction.' Glen jerked his head to the right. 'It stands up on a hill, and they say the monks built it there because the river's shallow at that point – a ford. The stepping stones they used are still there. It's twenty-five pounds a night, by the way, bed and breakfast. Will you be wantin' dinner as well? It's fifteen pounds extra, but worth it. She's a good cook, my Libby. Nothin' fancy and no menus. She makes it, and the guests eat it. Never had a complaint yet.' He grinned at Saul. 'It's thanks to her that I'm carryin' all this weight, but I'm not complainin' either.'

'Aye, put me down for dinner as well, why not? Do I leave the car out front?'

'There's a yard at the back with enough room to take it.'

'I'll move it now, then.' Saul Beckett went towards the door and Glen, who had been set for a chat, had no option but to let him pass.

'A walkin' holiday, is it?' he asked as they clattered back down the stairs to the small hallway. The new guest's clothes were well worn and shabbily comfortable, and his boots sturdy.

'Aye, I do a lot of that.' Saul ducked out of the front door and when he returned five minutes later Glen was waiting in the small reception area.

'Dinner at seven thirty. Here's your key, and the register

– all we need's your name and address and your car registration.'

'Fine.' The guest spun the register round and swiftly scrawled the required information. 'See you later,' he said, and disappeared upstairs while Glen studied the new entry in the register, barely noticing the sound of a taxi passing by.

Clarissa Ramsay, huddled in the back seat, was scarcely aware that the taxi had reached Prior's Ford. Her mind had been a confused jumble ever since the moment, ten days earlier, when she received the phone call from her stepson to tell her that her husband, visiting his family in the Lake District, had succumbed to a massive and totally unexpected stroke. Since then – throughout the rushed journey south, the funeral arrangements, the funeral itself, the journey back to Dumfries and Galloway – she had felt in a sort of waking trance.

When the taxi drew up outside the house on the corner of Adams Crescent and Main Street and the driver said cheerfully, 'Here we are, then – Willow Cottage,' she jerked upright and stared out at the pretty two-storey house for a few seconds before recognising it as her home. Hers and – just hers, she realised bleakly.

'Oh – thank you.' She was still fumbling with the rear door when the man opened it from the outside. 'I'll see to your luggage, love,' he said, helping her to alight. While she looked for her wallet he carried her cases up the path and placed them on the mat before the front door.

She paid him, adding a generous tip. Keith hadn't believed in tipping people. 'A fair day's work for a fair day's pay,' he always said, and when Clarissa pointed out that people such as taxi drivers and hairdressers depended on tips to make

up their low wages, he had informed her that tipping them just allowed their employers to profit by keeping their wages low. But now Keith was dead, and she was free to do as she wished. And the taxi driver had been exceptionally kind.

'Want me to see you in?' he asked as he pocketed the money.

'No, I can manage, but thank you for offering.'

'You're very welcome, love,' he said, and hopped back into his cab. As he drove back to his cab rank Clarissa turned slowly to face the house that Keith had chosen for his retirement.

It looked back at her impassively, neither welcoming nor rejecting her. She walked up the flagged path between the neat borders that Keith had weeded just before leaving for the Lake District and put her key in the lock. Once inside, she put her cases down at the foot of the stairs, then sat on the second to bottom step, wondering what on earth she was going to do with the rest of her life.

When the Gift Horse was open during the tourist season, visitors were served coffee made in the small kitchen behind the shop, but when she was working there during the closed season Ingrid brought her coffee-maker from the house.

Now, as she poured coffee and added a generous tot of her husband's whisky to each mug, she took time to glance out of the window.

'Isn't that Mrs Ramsay getting out of that taxi? Poor woman,' she added as Helen joined her at the window. 'Do you think we should ask her in for a coffee?'

'She might not feel like company, when she's just back from burying her husband,' Jenny said doubtfully, joining her friends, a half-made rag doll in one hand. 'It's not as if

either of them mixed much with people. They seemed to prefer their own company.'

'That might have been because they were newcomers.'

'It might also have been because they didn't care for strangers. Some people are like that.'

'Whichever it is, best leave her to get settled in,' Helen advised. 'She'll be tired after the funeral and the journey from England.'

'I wonder if she'll stay in the village?' Jenny pondered.

'I imagine she'll want to go back south now she's been widowed. Such a shame, him dying so soon after retiring. Poor woman!' Ingrid said again.