

THE MAD DOG CAFÉ

CHAPTER 1

1 February 2010

Mad Dog Café: February 1st 2010, wind from the west, very cold. Yesterday's soup, new bread, apple crumble.

Slamming the car door against the wind, Holly ran over to the door of the Mad Dog Café and fumbled for the key with icy fingers.

The interior was a welcoming contrast: warm, with a smell of toast and wood smoke on the air. Cameron sat hunched by the fire staring at the flames, his fair hair glinting in the warm light. He turned as she came in.

"Sorry, I meant to unlock the door. What's that huge book?"

"It's an old ledger, I think. Jasper's mum found it in a brocante. I'm going to use it as the Mad Dog diary, starting today . . . when I've had some coffee."

"I'll make it," said Cameron stretching. "What a night."

"Something happened?"

"No, just that my charming daughter was awake for most of it. That west wind — the cypress trees creaked madly. Mind you I was awake anyway." He walked into the kitchen looking miserable. Holly decided interrogation was called for.

She took off her coat, placed the book on the table and examined it further.

"M.P." she murmured, looking at the faded gold script. "Michel Puso? Marchandise Payé? Or perhaps Mas Picard? The original name of the Mad Dog. How strange and how fitting."

She opened it, smoothing down the pages of cream paper, darker at the edges with age, thin red lines marking the columns. There were only two lines of writing in slanting script.

1 février 1898, vent ouest, froid. Trente litres vin rouge, chez Sieur Dracard: quinze francs. Huit sacs de pommes de terre.

Then what had happened? Why one line? The date was eerily exact. Cameron came back in and looked over her shoulder: "That was quite a find — I wonder what it was for. It doesn't look like an ordinary accounts book."

"I don't know, but it has a special resonance with this place. Have you got a decent pen?"

"Just the thing . . . my grandfather's that I use occasionally." He looked in the drawer of the table; the pen was there under some papers. He shook it and the ink flowed. "Still works."

Holly took it and wrote in careful script: *Mad Dog Café: February 1st 2010, wind from the west, very cold. Yesterday's soup, new bread, apple crumble.* "There, that's what Jasper said we were going to have today — there's a load of apples from that tree at the back to use up."

"I like that," said Cameron, looking at the drying ink. "Do you think we should keep a general record of everything concerning the Café each day?"

"Yes — whatever any of us want to say. I might say, for example — black clouds on the horizon, Cameron looking unusually depressed, Irish stew, raspberry Pavlova."

Cameron smiled sadly: "Oh . . . that obvious is it?"

"Out with it."

Cameron went back to the fire and sat down.

"Sandra's mother phoned yesterday. We had a very long conversation about Sandra's death. Of course it's incredibly difficult for her as they only really got to know each other in the last few years."

"Should you go back and see her?"

"No need. They're going to visit us. She wants to start having more contact with Kitty . . . I mean she is her grandmother."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course it is. It's just rather stirred up the past for me. It's true that I found it difficult with her after Sandra's death and I know I was always second choice to Roberto in her mind . . . however, life goes on, and they really help financially with Kitty. We just need to talk through everything — get it all clear. In fact, I think they're going to try and come for the opening in April." He paused and sighed. "Actually, I really like them too . . ."

"So, what's the *real* problem then?" Holly persisted.

Cameron caved in: "It's Jo, she's been offered a job in Australia."

"Ah, I see."

"She should take it of course. It's a year's contract, and nothing has actually happened between us, well, nothing to suggest we're a couple or anything."

"Nothing except you both seemed insanely happy and couldn't keep out of the bedroom."

Cameron smiled sleepily: "It was an unreal two weeks, but she had to go back to London — things to sort, life to continue."

"Did you think it would turn into more than . . ."

"Sex? Yes . . . Holly, I really love her. There I said it. You had better write it in the book. Once again Cameron heads off into the ocean of love, ill-equipped in a small boat with one oar."

"Did you tell her?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I was scared . . . it seemed too perfect."

"I think you should tell her. You've nothing to lose — ring today."

Cameron went upstairs slowly and looked in at his young daughter. She was still asleep, her blonde hair fanned out across the pillow. He went into the office and sat in the armchair, remembering New Year's Eve and what had happened with Jo in the same chair. He was aroused in an instant and moaned her name. How could she do this to him? Holly was right, he should have phoned earlier.

He sat on the desk, picked up the phone and dialled hesitatingly, trying to imagine her unknown flat: full of books? tidy or disarranged? How little he knew of her daily existence. Last year they had just walked for miles, discussed nature, and fallen to the ground to ravish each other at any opportunity. He hadn't said it — too early, but when was too early?

The phone was still ringing; perhaps she had gone already. There was a click as she picked up, breathless: "Yes, who is it?"

Breathless? Inopportune moment? *No, please . . .*

She spoke again, her voice calmer: "Hello?"

"Hello, Jo, it's me . . . Cameron."

"Cameron" she breathed the name slowly. "I ran all the way back up the stairs. I was just going."

"Going?"

"To Australia."

"Really? You took the job then."

"I had no choice — too well paid to refuse at the moment, and there seemed no reason to stay . . . or was there?"

"Jo, I don't know how to say this, well I do . . . but, I love you." He wanted to say more: *please don't go, come back to Castallen, I'm aching for you, HELP!*

There was a silence for several bleak years, then: "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It seemed too early. I was scared — stupid at my age. Have you come across the word limerance?"

"No."

"I was looking in the dictionary for the definition of love. I was trying to write to you . . . anyway, this word, it means that state of all consuming infatuation at the beginning of a relationship. I was afraid you might have thought that's all it was."

"Oh, Cameron . . . look I've got to go and there's so much to say. Shit, my cab's here. I'll call you when I get there. Bye . . ."

That was it, silence: she hadn't said it back. He needed her to. Stop. Work to be done, calm, practical, stoical Cameron. He went back downstairs and wrote a list.

Finish floor in library.

Order more cement.

Ask André if I can borrow his brother's digger for a day.

Finish window frames in second bedroom.

The pen stopped. He stood up and pulled on his coat. "Holly?" he called.

She came in, hands splashed with blue from one of her paintings. "Yes?"

"I'm going out for a walk, just half an hour, can you check Kitty?"

"Of course." Holly saw the red eyes and didn't ask. The door shut with its familiar creak.