

Riverstones

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Chapter 1 Reflections

Charlie, a bandy-legged sea-farer with a salt-and-pepper beard approached the bar. Elbowing his way past a couple of old-timers idly chewing their pipes, he said, "Mary, how are you my darlin'?" He grinned, a twinkle in his mischievous blue eyes. Charlie was a scallywag who made angels cry with his singing voice and put the fire under the devil himself with his fiddle.

Mary picked up a cloth and idly wiped a glass. "I ain't complaining, Charlie. No blighter listens to you anyways."

"Ah, Mary, can I help you with your complaints, make you forget them a while?" he asked running his fingers through his scraggy beard. "What you need is a man to keep you so you don't have to work no more." He eyed her speculatively, like a business proposition.

Mary lifted a shoulder, "A man is the very reason I am working, Charlie."

Undaunted, Charlie kept on. "But you must get lonely, love. Do you not want someone to keep you warm at night?" He reached out to touch her hand.

Mary shied away. "You've a way with words, Charlie, my man, but I have a fire to keep me warm."

He heaved a hefty sigh. "You break my bleeding heart, woman."

"What I need," Mary said slowly, deliberately, "is me customers to be spending some money. What are you drinking, Charlie?"

He laughed, but the laughter was light and short-lived. "One day, Mary, I'll charm you, girl. If I have to get you completely drunk to have me wicked way, so be it."

"Have you done well today then, that you're feeling so bold?"

"Very well indeed," he replied. "Drink with me, darlin', to celebrate — Champagne."

"Charlie, a wee drop of champagne is hardly likely to make me want to kick up my heels now. That's hardly going to cure my complaints, is it?" She put down the cloth and leaned closer.

Mary was a persuasive woman; he knew when he was beat. "Ah then, lassie, what will?"

"I reckon a case ought to help the situation." Mary cocked her head in the direction of the wooden case perched high on the shelf behind her.

Charlie's jaw dropped.

"Time's been terribly tough what with so many mouths to feed, and as you pointed out, no man around to help out." Mary ran a finger lightly down her neck and left it resting just above her breastbone. At forty, Mary was still attractive. In the dim light of the

paraffin lanterns, you could hardly see the effects of age. Her hair, only slightly greying around the temples, was fiery like her nature. She hid a tangle of wild red curls in a tight bun, but a couple of stray ringlets had worked their way free and hung rakishly over one eye. Green eyes sparkling, she said, "The case then, it is?"

His voice husky, Charlie asked, "Where's your man, Mary?"

Mary stepped back. "I'll tell you tales when I've got something to loosen my tongue."

He enjoyed the familiar game of cat and mouse. "By Jehoshaphat! I'll shout the whole bar. By the heavens," he bellowed, "I'm feeling that generous, I'll give champagne to the horses!"

The old-timers who were watching realized they were in luck and surged towards the bar.

"Good on you, mate. Claim doing well then, is it?" Jacka asked.

Mary used the stepladder to extract a couple bottles of champagne. Hoping to catch a glimpse of ankle or a peek of petticoat, Charlie's eager eyes followed her every move.

Holding the bottles high, Mary called loudly, "Champagne all round on Charlie, boys!"

There were more congratulatory slaps on the back by diggers anxious to make the most of Charlie's generosity. Mary doled out drinks to each digger in turn. They waited patiently, knowing they were likely to get a tongue lashing if they became unruly. She might be a small woman, but she commanded respect and put them in their place by a look, or at worst, a stern word or two.

"Charlie, man," Wee Sam downed his glass and smacked his lips, "you're as good a man as any I'd be likely to meet."

Raucous shouts of, "Here, here, here's to you, Charlie, long may you prosper," chorused around the crowded, smoke-filled room.

Mary watched, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth, as with a steady hand she poured herself a glass. Sipping quietly, she waited for the noise to die down.

Charlie leaned across the bar. "Ah, now me wee darlin', are you quite sure you wouldn't want me to help you out like? Help you run the place." Lowering his voice, he said, "I'm a man of some means you know."

Mary eyed him steadily over the rim of her glass. "Will you be paying in bank notes or gold?"

Charlie slapped a bank note on the bar. "Are you satisfied now woman? Now satisfy my curiosity? Are you widowed or no?"

Mary quickly tucked the note away. Smiling sweetly, she looked at Charlie from under her long lashes, then raising the glass to her own lips, she swallowed. Wiping the back of her hand across her mouth, she said, "No, I'll be fine."

Charlie's eyes narrowed. "You're a fine wee flower, but sometimes I could wring your bleeding neck woman; you try my patience so."

"Honest to God, Charlie, I don't know," she sighed. "My man went to Gabriel's with the first rush, and I've not seen hide nor hair of him since. Last I heard, he was going over Old Man Range to Hartley's. I don't know if he's dead or alive. Don't know if I'm supposed to be wearing widows' weeds, or if I should be celebrating the death of a lazy, good-for-nothing dreamer." Mary ran the cloth over the counter. "So, if you're intending to ask me to marry you, Charlie," she smiled sweetly up at him, "I don't know if I'm available or not, and that, my man, is God's honest truth."

"I think you're playing games with me, missy." Tossing back his glass, he drained and stamped it on the counter.

"Not at all, Charlie dear, a rich man like yourself,"

Mary dimpled, her hand lightly touching his, "I'd be a fool now, wouldn't I?"

His eyes stared at her tiny hand resting on his. She removed her hand. "But there you go, I've done told you. I wouldn't want to end up in jail for being a bigamist now, would I?"

A weather-beaten man with long white whiskers and no teeth, known only as Smiley, called across the bar, "Come on Charlie, play your fiddle, man, we need a good stomp to get the blood pumping."

"Yon woman is breaking me bleedin' heart, and you want me to be merry?" Charlie cried, accepting the good-natured banter amicably. The men applauded as he made his way back to the corner where his battered old violin case lay propped against the dark timber wall. With great pomp and ceremony, Charlie tucked his fiddle under his chin and struck up a lively beat.

Malcolm approached Mary; he was a tall, gangly, ruddy Scot: all arms and legs with no meat to his bones. "Where are your daughters, Ma'am?" he asked.

Mary was suspicious. She had noticed Malcolm McDonald hanging around of late; he was a thrifty man who didn't usually spend his money in taverns.

"Where all good girls should be, safely tucked up in bed. I never allow my daughters in the bar after dark," Mary said, firmly adding, "Nothing good happens after dark."

"Yes, yes, bring out your daughters, Mrs Healey," old McGinty called. "We need dancing partners and a bunch of prettier young ladies have never been seen anywhere in the known world."

“Ah McGinty,” Mary wagged her finger at the man,

“as I said, my girls are well and truly tucked up for the night, so I'm afraid you'll have to make do with my company.”

With a wicked wink, McGinty raised his glass, “You're still a beauty, Ma'am, no doubt about it. Aye, you'll do just fine.”

The pub was full of hardworking miners ready to spend their earnings. They made a colorful crowd dressed in yellow or white moleskins, blue shirts, and red sashes. Mary danced reels till her heart was racing. She refused the next miner's request, using sore feet as an excuse when a scuffle broke out in the corner. She quickly singled out the culprits; Little Tom and Billy Chicken were at the heart of it. Anxious for entertainment, those nearby grew quiet hoping it would come to fisticuffs.

Poised, ready to tell them to take it outside if need be, Mary elbowed her way towards them just in time to hear Billy tell Tom, “I work harder than you any day,” he argued, puffing up like an indignant pigeon. “What's more,” he added, prodding Tom in the chest, “I'm stronger and faster.”

“You?” Little Tom scoffed, unable to believe the audacity of the man. “You're weaker than a half-starved kitten. You can barely lift a flour bag.”

Billy swelled with hurt pride. “I could lift you, you great over-stuffed buffoon.”

They were an odd pair, normally the best of mates. Little Tom was anything but little; he weighed no less than 15 stone, was as broad around the chest as he was tall, but he was a simple oaf. On the other hand, Billy Chicken was a wiry wee man with a big heart who weighed no more than ten stone dripping wet. The pair worked together, ate together, slept in the same tent, and drank together as often as luck afforded.

Tom laughed, tapping a finger to his temple. “Yon sun has fried your brain.”

Just then, Buchanan sidled up, a shrewd, sharp, well-dressed little man, who back in the old country had held some high position in the mines. “I'll wager on Billy Chicken, not only that he can lift you, but I'll bet he can carry you over the road and back again, I'm that sure of Billy's strength.”

Astounded, Little Tom shook his head. “You're mad!” Billy looked equally amazed.

Never one to miss an opportunity, Mary butted in, “How much?”

Buchanan sized up the opponents. “I reckon a pound on Billy Chicken.”

Billy braced himself. Planting his legs, he hunkered down, ready.

“No,” Buchanan stopped him. “Not tonight. You’ve both had too much to drink, and it would be unfair on Billy.” He pointed a finger at Little Tom. “You’d weigh heavier and he’d not have the legs.”

Posturing, Little Tom said, “The silly fool has twigs for legs that’ll snap under my weight.”

There were howls of laughter until Buchanan silenced them by holding up an authoritative hand. “I’ll draw up a document stating Billy Chicken has to carry you from the veranda to the road’s edge, to the picket fence and back again in front of witnesses. Mary here will hold the money,” he said, handing her a pound note.

“Any takers?” Mary breezed over to the wall, picked up the chalk and began writing names on the slate.

“Tis a foregone conclusion,” one old-timer hollered, to choruses of laughter.

Mary shouted, “Back the winner and reap the rewards, gentlemen.” Plucking money off those willing to make a bet, she tucked the takings safely away from view.

Buchanan stood on an upturned crate. “Righto lads,” he said in his authoritarian manner. “I’ll draw up a contract, I’ll act as referee, and all decisions will be final. You’ll both have to sign the document promising to comply with the rules or the bet is off. Mary here will keep record. Fair?”

“Fair.” Little Billy shook Buchanan’s hand.

“You’re mad, you silly young cockerel...” Tom wagged his head, whispering to Buchanan, “You’d lose your money, nothing surer.”

“What’s the matter? Are you frightened then?” Billy challenged.

Reluctantly, Tom sighed, “Count me in.” Pumping Buchanan’s hand he said, “As the good book says, a fool and his money are easily parted.”

Buchanan grinned slyly. “Righto. Wee Billy here is going to carry Little Tom across the road and back. All those who want to see that be out on the veranda at precisely five o’clock tomorrow night.”

“No, Saturday,” Mary interrupted, quickly adding, “That’ll give Billy time to build up.”

“Aye, and more time for folks to place bets,” Buchanan agreed, nodding. “Deal?”

“Deal,” Billy Chicken agreed.

A general consensus was reached — it would be a spectacle worth downing tools to watch.

Tired of the debate, old Smiley cornered Charlie. “Play your fiddle, man,” he implored. The diggers cheered as Champagne Charlie tucked his well-fingered fiddle under

his chin and struck up a lively Irish beat. Forgetting her sore feet, Mary danced like the devil himself.

As the evening wore on, one by one the patrons took to their mounts, the less fortunate among them drunkenly weaving their way home to makeshift hovels on foot. Mary herded the last stragglers out. She used a half bucket of water to douse a couple of sleeping drunks under the billiard table and chased them on their way.

Ever hopeful, Charlie lingered by the door. "Are you sure you don't need me to keep you company, lass?"

"Get away with you, you old rogue," she laughed.

"You know where I am if you change your mind, little darlin'."

Pushing him out into the inky night, Mary said, "Goodnight, Charlie dear," and slid the bolt to.

Mary extinguished the paraffin lanterns one by one, and then armed with only a candle to light the way, she moved cautiously along the narrow tongue and groove passageway, past the girls' room to the sanctuary of her own space. The dying embers in the fireplace lit the otherwise sparsely furnished room with a warm welcoming glow. Her eldest girl, Annie, had pulled the drapes and turned down the bed. Kneeling on the rag mat, Mary used the tongs to pluck a few coals from the fire, she filled the bed-warmer then slid it between the sheets, sat on the edge of the bed, and with great relief tugged off her boots. Piece by piece, she removed her clothing, laying it neatly aside to be ready come morning. Already in a melancholy mood, the sight of the diamond patterned quilt made her sad. There was a lump in her throat that would not shift. *The quilt is a keepsake, a patchwork of our lives*, Mary thought, shaking her head. God, she was feeling morose. *Must be the wine*, she decided. She didn't often allow herself the luxury of dwelling on the past, so she attributed her black mood to two things. Firstly, today had been her wedding anniversary: she had done her best to forget her husband and all his grand promises. She had loved him once, but now she loathed him. And secondly, there was Meg's ridiculous notion of becoming a governess. What was the girl thinking?

Mary pulled out the many pins that kept her unruly hair in place; a tangle of bouncy ginger curls, it tumbled about her face. She checked her reflection in a handheld mirror. The dim light would have been kind if it hadn't shown the circles under her eyes. Blessed with a peaches and cream complexion, cupid bow mouth, and almond-shaped green eyes Mary knew she what was what men called attractive. Even if she hadn't been, there were plenty of men here in need of a woman to warm their bed. There was such a shortage

of women on the goldfields she could have married several times over if she'd wanted. She tucked a wayward curl behind her ear and smiled. Yes, marriage was guaranteed on the goldfields — even if one had the body of an elephant and the face of a sheep.

Washing the day from her face, the chill water from the washbasin made her hands and face tingle. Mary emptied the coals from the bed-warmer back into the fire filling the small room with smoke and making it alive with ghosts.

She was lonely. Staring at the empty bed, she had an outlandish thought — perhaps she should consider Charlie's attentions. Encourage them even. He was a good man, and she did need a hand about the place. It would be good to have someone make her feel like a woman again. She indulged herself, wondering if Charlie would be a good lover.

Slipping beneath the heavy covers, she blew out the lone candle. She stared at the blue imp flames that danced in the grate, casting shadows on the dark panel walls. Here she was, a married woman, considering taking another man to her bed. Mary shut her tired eyes, but the thoughts wouldn't go away. "I hope you rot in Hell, James Patrick Healey!" she cursed. Pulling the covers up over her head, she willed herself to sleep.

Chapter 2 Liaison

In a futile attempt to block out the raucous noise coming from the tavern, Annie pushed the door closed and bolted it. There was a chill in the air. The draught whistling under the door made the candles flicker in their pretty porcelain holders. Kitty bounced on the bed, wormed her way between the freshly starched sheets, hugged her rag doll tight, and closed her bright button eyes. Meg sat at the dresser brushing her long locks in her usual rhythmic fashion.

It was the end of another long, hard day; their mother's favorite saying was '*it was better to wear out than rust*'; all three girls were convinced their mother would never afford them the luxury of rusting. Annie tucked the heavy patchwork quilt up under Kitty's chin and smiled down at her youngest sister. At twelve, Kitty was the most like their mother in appearance. Small in stature, but strong in spirit, she looked like a little doll, but she was a quick-witted, amicable little pixie with a warm soft nature.

"Get some sleep, young lady, you'll need it. The Banshee has plenty of chores for us to do come morning," Annie said, patting the top of Kitty's head.

Meg snorted, "Banshee's right." Her fingers curled tight around the intricate silver brush; not caring about snags or tangles, she dragged the brush through her long hair. Perched on the three-legged stool in front of the dresser mirror, with her porcelain skin and large chocolate-brown eyes, Meg looked waif-like. The flames from the fire highlighted auburn tints in her dark hair. Dressed only in her white linen nightgown, she was pale as a ghost.

Annie was the taller by two inches, although they both shared their father's dark looks, his hair, and his eyes. A flicker of a smile crossed Annie's face as she remembered her father calling them after two waterfalls: *Gentle Annie* and *Roaring Meg*. She missed her father dearly.

As she slowly, methodically, undressed before the fire, her shadow eerie on the wall, she said to Meg, "I heard you and Ma arguing." She had decided it was better to mention it than let Meg fester.

"I'd be surprised if the whole gully hadn't," Meg replied bitterly.

Kitty popped a curious eye open and listened.

Annie enjoyed the sudden rush of freedom as she unlaced her corset. "So what were you arguing about?" she asked, pretending she didn't know.

Meg turned, her brown eyes widening in surprise. "Did you not hear? Ma was howling like a westerly."

"A little," Annie admitted, "but not all."

Fingers white, Meg clenched the brush in an iron grasp. "I'm so mad I could spit! I can't even bring myself to talk about it."

Annie hastily reminded herself that it was silly to get Meg all riled up. Not now, especially not tonight, not when she needed everything to go according to plan.

"Tell me about it when you're ready," Annie said, lightly touching Meg's shoulder.

Disappointed, Kitty closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Annie swallowed. She could barely breathe; her stomach was full of butterflies. It was too late to back out now though, everything was arranged. Wrestling the billowing nightgown over her head, Annie threaded her arms through the long lace sleeves. Quickly scooping up her clothes, she placed them tidily on the rocking chair and stowed her black boots underneath. She paced back and forth across the room, her long plaited hair swinging like a pendulum. Glancing at the small angelic form curled up in the double bed, she was relieved to see Kitty already asleep. The noise of Charlie's violin belting out a lively tune accompanied by a stampede of hobnailed boots was deafening.

"I swear Kitty sleeps the sleep of the dead," Annie said with a quick shake of her head. "How does she do it?"

"Used to it I guess," Meg shrugged.

Annie's anxious eyes strayed to the clock. It was almost ten. Meg didn't appear to be the slightest bit drowsy. Still, it was little wonder Annie had overheard the fighting; the ruckus easily travelled through the thin scrim walls. Opening the drapes, she gazed up at the clear night sky. "It's a beautiful night," she said looking up at the stars.

Meg gave a very unladylike snort. "I don't understand you, Anne Healey. You insist on the door being bolted, yet open the drapes for the world to see."

Yes, ironic isn't it, thought Annie, closing the curtains again. Coaxing the brush from Meg's fingers, she said, "Here let me, you'll soon be bald if you continue attacking your locks in such a ferocious manner." Meg relaxed under Annie's gentle ministrations. Meg's eyes were rounder than Annie's, and her nose dotted with fewer freckles. Their mother said a face without freckles was like the sky without the sun.

"There you are, dearie," Annie said, handing Meg back her brush.

"Thank you," Meg smiled gratefully.

Annie made her way to bed. She plumped the down pillows, frowned at the clock, then pulled back the covers.

“What's the matter?” Meg asked, troubled. “You haven't taken your eyes off the clock.”

“Tired is all,” Annie hastily replied. The bed dipped with their extra weight. Kitty stirred but didn't wake. Propped on one elbow, Meg said to Annie, “Snuff the candle then.”

“No, I'll read for a bit,” Annie answered cautiously.

Fearing her face would give her away, she picked up the small book of poems by Robert Burns that she kept on her bedside table. “You go to sleep; I'll blow out the candle soon, I promise.”

“You'll damage your eyes if you are not careful,” Meg warned as she rolled over taking a good deal of the quilt with her.

“How will we ever make a good match? You'll be bald and I'll be blind, a pretty pair of maids we'll be,” Annie teased.

Meg smiled, in spite of herself.

“Sleep well,” Annie said, repositioning the candle.

“Night,” Meg returned.

Annie read the same passage again and again. She listened to her sisters' steady breathing, watched the time, and tried in vain to calm her jumbled nerves. Kitty lay as still as a stone, but Meg tossed, softly murmuring in her sleep. Annie's heartbeat sounded thunderous to her own ears. She watched the candle wax slide and gather in puddles in its pretty, rose-colored, porcelain holder.

The noise from the bar died down as one by one the patrons left until there was nothing but the lone clack of a billiard ball. Finally, the clock struck midnight. Satisfied both girls were asleep, Annie stole out from under the covers and tiptoed as soundlessly as she could across the wooden floorboards. A green board creaked; Annie's heart stopped; but neither sister stirred. Having purposefully left her cloak on the arm of the rocking chair, she now shrugged it on. Hardly daring to breathe, she cocked her head bird-like to the side and listened. It was now or never.

Annie raised the sash as quietly as she could, and gasped as a blast of fresh mountain air assaulted her senses. Struggling to keep the window ajar, she threw her boots out and they landed with a dull thud on the crisp ground. She bit her lip and waited. Nothing. Bunching her nightdress between her legs, she climbed over the ledge and dropped softly to the ground. Wedging a stick in place to keep the window slightly ajar, she stilled her heart and listened; apart from the dying voices of diggers now drifting away from the hotel, there was

only the distant hoot of an owl and a rat scurrying past to disturb the night's silence. Impatiently, Annie tugged on her boots and tied them with fumbling fingers. She blinked rapidly to accustom her eyes to the dark. She was lucky; the large white moon hung low in the night sky. Her face hidden by her hood, she wrapped her cloak close to prevent the whiteness of her nightgown showing, and then she ran, stumbling over the uneven ground.

As she approached the back of the stables, he stepped out of the shadows, his form indistinct, and his face hidden from view. Catching her breath, she froze. The moon's infused light glinted on his uniform buttons as shiny as new shillings.

"You came!" he said. Removing her hood, he looked deep into her eyes.

Unable to speak, her tongue dry and sticking to the roof of her mouth, she nodded.

He drew her near and held her close; his large strong hands slipping easily around her waist, he pulled her in front of him. Under the cover of trees, chest pressed to her back, he lowered his head to whisper, "I wasn't sure you would." His warm breath tickled her ear.

Annie bit back a smile. "I-I wasn't sure either," she admitted, finally finding her voice. The hands resting on her shoulders anchored her.

His hand slid from her shoulder and moved to her chest. "Hush," he whispered, "look there," he said, finger pointing skywards.

Annie's gaze followed his finger and there on the branch of a large Ti-tree sat a wood pigeon, head tucked on its breast, fast asleep. "Ah," she sighed, relieved that it was just a bird.

He turned her around to face him. "Aren't the stars bright tonight?"

"Beautiful," she agreed.

He gently stroked her cheek with his finger, then sweeping her plait aside he bent to kiss her neck. "Yes," he murmured, "like you." Taking her by the hand, he led her to the saddle blanket spread on the ground. Annie's legs folded like a new-born foal's. He looked at her as though she was a parcel to be unwrapped. Thoroughly entranced, he knelt before her gazing into her eyes, "I'm with a beautiful woman, the most beautiful woman in the district. I'd say it was a perfect night." He leaned in and lips brushing hers, he kissed her.

Chapter 3 Woman's Work

Trying to shake the weariness that continued to plague her, Mary forced her eyes open, gathered strength, and dragged herself out of her warm bed. There was much to do and little time for idleness. She was about to knock on the girls' bedroom door when she overheard Meg snort. Peeking through the crack, Mary could just see Meg standing in front of the dresser mirror twisting her long dark locks into a chignon.

Stabbing pins in the knot, Meg said, "It's because I said I want to go work for the Asterlys. She hates the English with a passion; she might have said yes if I was going to be a domestic for someone else."

"Now, now, you're only upsetting yourself," Annie said trying to pacify her.

"I'm sick of being told what to do, where to sit and stand, how to think, what to say, and how to behave. I'm not a trained monkey."

"Hush!" Annie warned, "or she'll hear you."

Mary shrank against the wall.

"I don't care," Meg pouted. "It's not fair."

The back door squeaked. Kitty entered carrying an emptied chamber pot; she lit up the back passage with her sunny smile. "Morning, Ma," she called brightly.

Recovering, Mary strode purposefully into the room.

"Right," she said, loudly clapping her hands. "It's time to get to work; the day is a-wasting."

Breakfast consisted of a bowl of steaming hot porridge followed by a healthy dose of castor oil. Kitty was her normal chirpy self, while Annie had dark circles under her eyes, but Meg's face was as solemn as the grave.

Mary gave each girl a basket and chased them out the door, clipping Meg's ear and saying, "Keep that face up and I'll warm ye bum for you good and proper; that'll give you something to pout about!"

As soon as they were out of sight, Mary read the confiscated letter again. Lady Asterly had a proud, neat hand; the letters were small but nicely looped. Mary folded the letter and hid it in her apron pocket. *Bugger the woman*, she thought angrily, taking out her consternation on the butter churn. *Meg is my daughter, and that's that. Perhaps someone else can make the child see reason; perhaps one of her brothers could try.*

Mary was just putting muslin cloth over the last pats of butter when the girls arrived home. Fortunately, they returned in a better mood.

“Good, good,” Mary smiled at Kitty’s basket of berries, “Put them on the table.” Industrious as ever, she bustled about getting things ready.

“Kitty, you can help me make the jam,” she said reaching up to unhook the jam pan from its place above the camp oven. “As for you two, there are hares that need skinning out back. Mind you don’t damage the pelts.”

Annie and Meg groaned; they hated that job.

“What are you two waiting for?” Mary scowled, waving an impatient hand, “Off you go.” She turned her back on them. “Measure out four pounds of sugar, love,” she instructed Kitty.

Annie and Meg traipsed out the back door, resigned to their fate.

“Ma?” Kitty asked, pouring sugar into the brass scales.

“Mmm?” Tipping the last of the blackberries into the pan, Mary didn’t look up.

“Why won’t you let Meg work for the Asterlys?”

“For starters, they are English — and Protestant ones at that — but I don’t think it’s any of your business, young lady,” Mary snapped. “This place is hard enough to run with four pairs of hands, three would be nigh on impossible. You girls grumble about your workload now; as sure as eggs, you and Annie wouldn’t want the extra chores should Meg not be here to help.”

Realising she was skating on dangerous ground, Kitty let it lie.

“Come on,” Mary tweaked Kitty’s nose, “after we bottle this here jam, there’s bread to bake, beds to change, and washing to get done — and then there’s the hotel to get ready for the night. There’s no rest for the wicked is there, love?”

They worked quietly side by side, Mary stirring the jam to ensure it didn’t stick, while Kitty prepared the jars. Soon the jam began to bubble filling the kitchen with a hot, sweet, sickly scent. Mary’s thoughts kept drifting back to her argument with Meg; yesterday, the insolent child had waltzed into the kitchen and told her she was going to be a governess. Told, mind you, not asked. Well, the girl could forget such a silly notion and that was that. Despite her feelings for the English gentry, there was more than enough work to keep them busy right here at home.

She knew she was in for a battle; Meg was the kind of child who would fight tooth and nail for what she believed in. Sooner or later, the girls would make their own way in the world, but for now, she needed them here, especially with the boys away at the fields.