

KICKER'S JOURNEY

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*Winner of the GCLS Literary Award,
The Rainbow Award for Excellence,
and an IPPY bronze medal*

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by Lois Cloarec Hart

Dedication

Martin, Kathy, Laura, and Carol
With profound love and gratitude for this journey we've
taken together.

Acknowledgements

Kicker's Journey began as a short story I wrote for my wife in late 2002. It was posted online as *Kicker's Heart* and grew over six years to the novel it is today. It would never have reached fruition without the input of many people.

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Lastly and most profoundly, my unending gratitude to my beloved wife and primary editor, Day Petersen. *Je t'aime*, little sweetie.

Historical Note

For the most part, I stayed true to the history of western Canada in 1899-1900; however, there were two significant anomalies in *Kicker's Journey*.

At the time, the new century was considered to start in 1901. I changed that apprehension for narrative purposes.

Additionally, mining in the Crowsnest Pass did not truly begin until 1903. I advanced that context by three years. For an accurate and entertaining history of the Crowsnest Pass, I highly recommend the Frank Slide Interpretative Centre in the Municipality of Crowsnest Pass, Alberta, Canada. The stories Pudge relates to Seamus and Kicker from the Pass come directly from newspapers of the era, showcased at the centre. (<http://www.history.alberta.ca/frankslide>)

Prologue

On an unseasonably hot spring day, fourteen-year-old Kicker Stuart stopped in front of her destination. Her ragged, ill-fitting clothes were caked with dust, and her feet burned within shabby boots from the remorseless pounding of the last two hours. She wiped one grimy sleeve over dry, cracked lips and blinked away drops of sweat. *Should ha' brung water wi' me. Twas foolish not to.*

Kicker's discomfort quickly melted into awe as she stared at the stately stone pillars that flanked the entrance to the Grindleshire Academy for Young Ladies. She had never seen such an imposing entrance, nor felt more keenly the lowly circumstances of her birth. *Bless'd Jesus. I'll fit here wors'n a mare in a chicken coop.*

Kicker swallowed hard and peered in concentration at the bronze tablet on one pillar. She could make out the numbers as 1868, but could not read aught else on the sign that marked the founding of the Academy.

"Huh, twas here ten years b'fore I were e'en born, an' I ain't ne'er bin by this way b'fore." She allowed herself a moment to muse on the boundaries of her life to date. Kicker had walked only five miles from her home village, carrying a small sack with all her worldly possessions slung over her back, yet the world she was about to enter was as alien to her as a London drawing room.

I hope you ain't sent me into the lion's den, Adam. Kicker mentally directed the admonition at her older brother, who was responsible for her presence at this gate. She squared her shoulders and passed into the grounds of the finishing school

for daughters of families who did not have the status or influence to secure more elite placements.

Kicker trudged up the long driveway and gaped at the massive stone building with ostentatious turrets on all corners. *I ne'er seen nothin' so gran'.*

The Academy's position on a rise dominated two hundred acres of lush green lawns, manicured gardens, cultivated fields, and thickly wooded land alongside a turbulent river. The institution was comprised of academic facilities, student dormitories, teacher and household staff quarters, as well as the Grindleshire family's private suite. The four wings of the main structure enclosed a cobble-stoned courtyard.

Behind the edifice, several small cottages for senior employees flanked the vast vegetable gardens that supplied the school's kitchen. Kicker's destination lay to the west side of the Academy—the stable, paddocks, storage, and maintenance buildings.

It was Saturday and students wandered the lawns and lingered in the lush gardens. Some of the girls were around her age, yet Kicker felt their differences keenly. Though an oddity even in her village, at least there her common clothes and scruffy hair did not mark her so blatantly an outsider.

Kicker nodded politely at two girls who crossed the driveway, sweeping their elegant dresses far from her path, only to be stung by the disdainful looks she received in return. Their giggles trailed after her as Kicker hastily detoured off the long driveway toward the stable.

Kicker relaxed as she headed away from the scornful students and toward the familiar environment. *Leastways I won' ha' to muck about wi' their sort. I hope Adam's right about this, though. Gonna be a long, thirsty walk home if he ain't.*

Her tempered optimism lasted until the moment she came face to face with the stable master, who viewed her approach with a scowl.

Kicker snatched the cap off her short, dark brown hair. “Would you be Ol’ Thomas, Sir?”

“Aye. You’re Henry Stuart’s girl—Adam’s sister?”

“Aye, Sir. I am.”

Old Thomas looked her up and down.

Kicker tried to project strength, but there was only so much she could do about her short stature and wiry body.

The stable master spat, an eloquent comment on his newest employee.

Kicker refused to wither; this was nothing new. Since the age of seven, when her parents reluctantly acknowledged she was useless at traditional female chores, she’d had to prove herself in the male domain.

Her father had finally yielded to her pleas and allowed Kicker to join her brothers in his smithy. As the years passed, Kicker had learned the ins and outs of the farrier’s trade. Now she was starting anew, but Kicker was confident her skills and industry would win Old Thomas over.

“Don’ be thinkin’ I’ll go easy on you jus’ cuz you’re a girl, got that?”

“Aye, Sir. I kin do a full day’s work, no less’n my brothers.”

Old Thomas’ scowl became less pronounced. “So says your da and Adam. They’re good men, honest men.” He turned away, but not before Kicker heard his final word on the matter. “I’ll gi’ ye a chance, but you set one foot wrong and I’ll toss you out on your arse. Don’ be thinkin’ I won’t, girl.”

Kicker grinned as she followed the stable master into the barn.

Old Thomas pointed to a door at the end of the aisle. “You kin throw your gear in there, then we got work to do.”

She hastened past the stalls and didn’t slow to examine the horses as she normally would have. Even the exhilarating discovery that she was to have a room entirely to herself did not delay her hurried return to the stable master.

“You kin b’gin by muckin’ out the place.” As Kicker started off, Old Thomas called after her, “How’d you come by such an odd name, anyway?”

Kicker flashed him a smile as she grabbed the pitchfork and set to work. “Twas Adam, Sir. The firs’ time he seen me, he called me a helluva kicker. Ma said she’d a’ready come up with thirteen names, an’ Kicker would have to do fer me. Said she was too tired to think up ’nother one.”

Old Thomas chuckled, then shot her a stern look. “Don’ be callin’ me Sir, girl. I ain’t one of ’em up t’ the ’cademy. I work fer my daily bread.”

“Aye.” Kicker fell into a comfortably familiar rhythm with the fork. *As do I.*

Chapter 1

Fall leaves crackled underfoot as Kicker trotted out of the gate mounted proudly on Grindleshire stable's latest acquisition. She brushed her hand over a stone pillar as she passed, and was able to reach higher than she ever had before.

Kicker rubbed the neck of the tall grey gelding. "Made this ride dozens of time o'er the last year, Banner, but I ain't ne'er gone home in such style."

Just outside the gate, Kicker had to pull Banner hard to one side to avoid a buggy loaded with students returning from a day in the city. She saw glances of irritation and disdain shot in her direction, but Kicker had become immune to those over the months. *Faces change, but the arrogance don'. Ain't gonna ruin my day, tis sure.*

On the way to the Stuart home, Kicker enjoyed the looks her mount received. She knew she was riding a special horse. By the expression on her brother's face as he waited at the fence line for her, he knew the same.

Adam pushed his hat back on his forehead and whistled appreciatively. "Damn, Kicker, that's one fine lookin' animal. Tell me you din't steal 'im."

Kicker cantered up to her brother, a wide grin on her face and her chest puffed up with pride. "Ain't he somethin'? The Academy jus' got him. His name's Banner, an' Ol' Thomas said I could borrow him fer my half day." She came to a stop in front of Adam and slid off Banner's back. "He stan's near eighteen han's."

Adam winked at her. "So how'd you get up on him, little sister? Jump off a stump?"

Kicker stuck her tongue out at her brother. "You're jus' jealous, cuz all you got to ride is that ol' nag." She jerked her thumb at the family mare grazing placidly in the nearby paddock.

Adam shrugged. "Maybe, but it ain't like you own this one anyway."

Kicker stroked Banner's neck. "No, but someday I'll own one e'en finer."

"Hah, by then there won' be anythin' but those newfangled motor cars about. That's what I'm gonna have one day."

Kicker frowned at Adam. Favourite brother and surrogate parent or not, such blasphemy regarding her beloved horses would not be tolerated. But before she could protest, Adam hooked her around the neck in a hug. Kicker punched him lightly in the ribs, and their customary greeting ritual was complete.

"Kin you get away fer a bit, Adam?"

"Could be, if we was to go fishin' and bring Ma somethin' back."

Kicker turned Banner out to graze with the mare. The siblings grabbed fishing poles from the woodshed and headed down to the creek and their favourite hole.

Kicker caught two, and Adam one, by the time their conversation picked up again.

"Looks like you grew some, Kicker."

"You jus' saw me las' month. 'Sides, bin well o'er a year since I lef' for Grindleshire. Wasn't gonna stay that scrawny fore'er."

Adam cast a glance his sister's way. "It's been that long, has it? I 'spect you think you're all growed up now." He pointed down the bank about twenty feet to a thick copse of

trees and bushes that overhung the river. “’Member the day I foun’ you there.”

“Tis where you always foun’ me.”

“Aye, but I’m talkin’ ’bout the day you ran from Ma.”

“Wasn’t runnin’ from Ma; I was runnin’ from Preacher Dodd’s sons.” Kicker shook her head in disgust at the memory. Though it had led to her current enviable living arrangement, at the time it seemed like the end of the world.

Adam chuckled softly. “If Ma’d had her way, you’d ha’ bin married right ’longside June an’ Edna las’ summer.”

Kicker shuddered at the memory of that horrible day.

Mary Stuart, had taken note of her seventh daughter, and realized that Kicker more closely resembled her brothers than her sisters. She wore her brothers’ hand-me-downs, disdaining, from the moment she could talk, the dresses that her older sisters wore. The patched trousers were more appropriate for the work Kicker did for her father, so Mary rarely protested.

However, the new cleric in town had three sons of marriageable age. Kicker was only fourteen, but Mary had been given in marriage when she was fifteen and decided that her unconventional daughter was old enough to wed. Along with her three unmarried older sisters, Kicker was to be included in the display of available females when the cleric dutifully came to call.

To that end, Mary ordered all the girls into their best clothes and spent a whole morning washing and dressing hair. When it came to Kicker, however, Mary met full scale rebellion. The girl flatly refused to don one of her sisters’ dresses for the occasion. When her mother grabbed her arm and tried to force her up the stairs to get into a frock, Kicker broke free and tore out of the house.

Adam had been sent to find her, and without hesitation headed straight for her usual hiding place. He’d found her

down by the creek, nestled amongst the bushes that overhung the slow moving water. When he'd squirmed in next to Kicker, folding his six-foot frame into the small space with difficulty, she'd scowled at him.

"Don' e'en ask. I don' care what Ma wants, I ain't puttin' on a dress fer anyone, let alone Preacher Dodd's pig-ass sons."

"I know, Kicker, and I ain't here to ask you to go back. I jus' thought you might wanna talk, is all."

Kicker's expression had softened and became more puzzled than fierce. "Why'd she do it? I tol' her over and over that I ain't e'er gettin' married. Why don' she b'lieve me?"

Adam had wrapped his arm around Kicker's thin shoulders and given her a warm hug. "Because she don' really know you, is why. You gotta understan'. Ma truly does think that the bes' she can do for all of us is see us married off and startin' families of our own."

"Damned if I'm e'er goin' to marry. No way I'm birthin' e'ry year 'til I drop dead."

"Ain't jus' not wantin' babies, eh?"

She'd stared uncomfortably at her stained, too-large boots and then glanced up shyly. "Not really. I jus' don' get it, Adam; what the fuss is about, I mean. E'en when I was in school, I thought the girls were actin' so silly, fawnin' over the boys. Hell, I could beat any of them gits in wrasslin' or knife toss. They weren't no big deal."

"You'll understan' someday, little sister. Someone will come along an' steal your heart clean away, cuz you know, there's a little bit more to life than wrasslin' and knife throwin', sweetie."

"Course I know that—there's horses, too."

To this day, Kicker did not understand why Adam had laughed so hard he almost fell into the creek. However, since he had delivered on his subsequent promise to make things

better, she did not care that she had been the butt of his merriment.

As always when it came to his favourite sibling, Adam went one step further than convincing their mother that Kicker was a poor candidate for matrimony. Within weeks, he procured for his sister the position as stable hand at Grindleshire's.

In the sixteen months since, Kicker had been content. She had her own small room—a luxury she'd never before experienced—work that she enjoyed, and the congenial company of a boss she respected, and who had come to respect her. She would never grow wealthy on the wages she earned, but she had enough and she was content.

Adam's voice recalled Kicker's attention to her present. "Looks to me like you've put on a poun' or two. They mus' be feedin' you right o'er there."

"Aye, Cook likes me fine. I bring her fish as a reg'lar thing. She's real partial to fresh trout, an' she'll fix it up special for us after t'others eat. Always saves me the bigges' piece of pie, too."

Adam smiled affectionately at her. "I'm glad. You foun' a home."

"Aye, I did, thanks to you."

They fished in silence for a while.

"Adam?"

"Aye."

"Ol' Thomas said somethin' t'other day."

"Aye?"

"He said the las' stable han' were in a scandal, an' tis why I got his job."

"Tis true."

There was distinct unease in Adam's voice and Kicker glanced up. She was surprised to see her brother shift uncomfortably. It piqued her curiosity further.

"So, what was't?"

"What?"

Kicker frowned. It wasn't like Adam to avoid a subject. "What was the scandal? What did the las' stable hand do twas so bad?"

Adam sighed deeply, and for a moment Kicker did not think he would answer.

"He...um...well, he d'spoiled a couple of the students. When twas foun' they was in a family way, he disappeared. After that, din't take a lot of convincin' to get Ol' Thomas to hire you, e'en if you was a girl."

"Huh." Kicker absorbed the new information. "Makes sense. He won' e'er have to worry 'bout nothin' like that with me."

There was a strangled sound from Adam, but when Kicker glanced at him, he shook his head. "No, I guess he won'." With an audible sigh, her brother changed the subject. "I got somethin' to tell you."

"Aye?"

"Aye. Me and Annie, we're gettin' married nex' month."

Kicker nodded slowly. She'd been expecting it. Adam had courted Annie Doyle for almost a year. Still, it would be hard losing him to another.

"Don' mean you're losin' me, jus' means you're gonna gain 'nother sister."

Like nine ain't enough? Kicker sternly set aside her jealousy. "Annie's nice. I'm glad fer you, Adam. You'll be a good husban'."

"An' some day, you'll be aunt to our chil'ren."

“Aye. Tis so.” But as always, when Kicker considered the traditional ways of marriage, her stomach got queasy. *Might be a’right for Adam, but it ain’t ne’er gonna be for me.*

~ * * * ~

“Mornin’, Kicker.”

“Mornin’, Cook. The wood bin was low, so I filled it.” It was getting cooler in the mornings as fall approached, and Kicker knew that bigger fires helped relieve the ache in Cook’s aging bones.

The rotund sovereign of Grindleshire’s kitchen beamed at Kicker. “You’re a good ’un, girl. I kin always depen’ on you. Wisht my lazy girls would take a lesson. I just ain’t able to keep after them like I used ta, back when you firs’ came to us.”

Kicker winked at Cook and crammed the remainder of her breakfast into her mouth. “If I kin get away t’night, I’ll bring you some fresh fish, too.”

Cook’s eyes sparkled with anticipation. The two of them would dine well this evening, though they generally did, fresh fish or not.

Kicker left the kitchen whistling as she headed for the stables. She had worked at Grindleshire’s for more than six years. Over time, she’d slowly assumed the heaviest of Old Thomas’ workload, though it had been almost two years before she was allowed to shoe the horses independently. It was now generally accepted around the school that when Old Thomas retired, Kicker would take his place as stable master.

Under warm, sunny skies, Kicker could not think of one thing wrong with her world. *Life is good, eh?* Reaching the stables, she laughed aloud from sheer pleasure and drew an indulgent smile from Old Thomas.

Hours later, Kicker had just finished shoeing the elderly bay that the Grindleshires favoured for their excursions to the finer homes in the county when Old Thomas beckoned her aside.

“Need you to pick up the new teacher comin’ in on the afternoon train.”

Kicker nodded. She was often sent to make pick-ups at the station as another new school year approached, and she had expected this particular assignment. Kitchen scuttlebutt had indicated someone new was coming in to replace a teacher who resigned her post to get married.

Old Thomas frowned as he regarded her. “An’ try to clean up a bit before you go. We don’ want the woman thinkin’ we’re a bunch of clods just b’cause we’re outta spittin’ distance of civilization.”

Unused to giving any thought to her appearance, Kicker glanced down at her dusty clothes. *Huh. You’d think I was goin’ to pick up the Queen, herself.* With a shrug, Kicker stepped up to the trough to rinse off the evidence of her duties. She barely got her hands wet before Old Thomas growled at her.

“Go use some soap, and put on a clean shirt.”

Instantly resentful of the unknown woman who was responsible for her having to bathe when it was not even Saturday night, Kicker stomped into the stable, muttering under her breath.

“Twould be a damned shame to offend Miss High ’n Mighty now, eh?” Kicker ignored the sleepy eyed chestnut that nuzzled her as she strode past the mare’s stall. “God forbid she breathe in a little sweat an’ horse shit.”

Kicker paused to kick her boots against the post outside her door and was forced to admit that there was more than a little manure clinging to them. She sighed, entered her room and

stripped off her footwear and clothes. She gave her boots a cursory brushing out the window, and then poured water from the chipped pitcher into the tin basin. Kicker seized the sliver of soap and made hasty work of her ablutions. She shivered as she dried herself on the threadbare towel and dragged a brush through short, riotous curls.

The small, cracked mirror, a discard from one of the students, reflected a young woman who was only several inches taller than the girl who had fled her mother's ill-advised designs. Small breasted, and deeply tanned from long hours in the sun, visitors to the Academy often mistook Kicker for a youth. She never bothered to correct anyone's assumptions. Still as wiry as she had ever been, Kicker's sinewy arms and leanly muscled back bespoke the manual labour that filled her days.

Kicker turned away with her customary disregard for the mirror's image and sought out her Sunday shirt and trousers. Mr. Grindleshire's rules insisted that everyone, from the lowliest stable hand to the Headmistress, attend Sunday services in the school chapel. She had learned early to keep one of her three changes of clothing in respectable condition.

Kicker dressed quickly and headed outside to find that Old Thomas had already harnessed the chestnut to the school's carriage. The bold maroon lettering on the side identified the small buggy as Grindleshire Academy's.

As Kicker sprang lightly to the seat and took up the reins, Old Thomas laid a hand on the buggy's edge. "Train'll be in at three if tis on time. The teacher's name is Miss Madelyn Bristow, and she'll likely have a trunk or two. Take 'er straight up to the school to see Mrs. Sheridan, and then put 'er things in 'er room. Got all that?"

He did not offer written instructions, as Kicker's literacy skills were severely lacking and Old Thomas' were non-existent, but they traded nods of perfect understanding.

"Aye. See you in a couple hours."

Kicker enjoyed the drive into town along the quiet country lanes. It was part of the comforting rhythms of her life. A familiar sight now to those she passed on the road and in the fields, many greeted her cheerfully. She quickly forgot her bathing inspired pique in the pleasure of the summer afternoon, as her earlier sense of wellbeing returned.

Kicker arrived at the station and was informed that the train was running late, so she settled back to wait, musing idly on the new teacher. In her experience, Grindleshire attracted two types of teachers. Some were hidebound spinsters who had taught so long that they could do it with their eyes and minds shut; others were young women barely out of school themselves, who would stay in the profession only until the first proposal of marriage came their way.

When the train pulled in, Kicker eyed the descending passengers and looked for a woman who had *teacher* stamped all over her. She readily disregarded the matrons returning from London, and the young mothers shepherding their noisy broods. Much to Kicker's surprise, when Miss Madelyn Bristow stepped down onto the platform, she did not fit either Grindleshire stereotype.

The woman looked to be in her mid to late twenties, neatly dressed in a pale blue shirtwaist and ankle-length, navy blue skirt, which was gathered at her slim waist with a thin black belt. Beneath a wide-brimmed hat, copper coloured hair was pulled back in a twist, and bright, inquisitive green eyes assessed her surroundings. Before Kicker could approach, the woman spotted her and walked quickly toward the carriage.

Kicker jumped down from the seat to greet the new teacher, noting that the other woman had three or four inches on her in height.

“Miss Bristow?”

“Yes. You’re from the Academy.”

It was not so much a question as a statement of fact, but Kicker nodded.

“Aye, Miss. D’you have a trunk, Miss?”

The teacher gestured over her shoulder where Kicker could see a porter hauling a large chest toward the carriage. She hastened to help him, and between them, they swung the trunk up on the back of the carriage. After tying it down, Kicker rushed to assist the teacher into the buggy. She was surprised when Miss Bristow insisted on riding up front with her rather than in the more comfortable passenger seat behind.

As Kicker guided the horse away from the station and onto the road that led out of town, she stole a sideways glance at her passenger. This was no shy, awkward neophyte, nor a rigid, humourless old maid. At a loss as to how to categorize the new teacher, Kicker maintained her silence while Miss Bristow took in her surroundings with evident interest. She was startled when the other woman finally addressed her.

“You have the advantage of me, my dear. What is your name?”

“Kicker Stuart, Miss.”

She could feel the teacher’s stare boring into her, and felt herself colour under the intense scrutiny, but Kicker kept her eyes firmly on the road.

“Kicker, is it?”

“Aye, Miss.”

“That is very...unusual.”

The words were not critical, only curious. Rather than taking refuge in her usual reticence, Kicker felt compelled to

explain. “M’brother Adam named me, Miss. Guess Ma thought it fit me good. Ne’er called me anythin’ else since the day I were born.”

“I see. So, Miss Kicker Stuart, tell me about the Grindleshire Academy for Young Ladies.”

It did not exactly feel like an order, but Miss Bristow’s expectant gaze and firm voice made it apparent she was confident of a full and informative answer.

Bet she don’ have no discipline problems in her classroom. With a small grin at the thought, Kicker gave a half shrug. “Not too sure what to tell you, Miss. I don’ stray too far from the stables mos’ days. I kin tell you that Missus Sheridan, the Headmistress, is a fair hand so long as you don’ cross her. She’s really the boss, e’en though Mister Grindleshire owns the place. You gotta duck when Missus Sheridan and Missus Grindleshire get to arguin’ cuz they kin shake the tiles off’n the roof and you don’ wanna get betwixt them. I kin tell you that Cook ain’t got no patience if you’re late fer meals, and she won’ be savin’ you anythin’ either. An’ I kin tell you that Pastor Hubble preaches the boringest sermons in the county, but you’re gonna hafta pretend to listen cuz the teachers all sit up front and Missus Sheridan will see you if you doze off.”

Kicker thrilled to the sound of Miss Bristow’s laughter. Then, embarrassed by her reaction, she jerked her cap lower over her eyes and stared straight ahead.

“Well, I shall certainly do my best not to fall asleep then, Miss Stuart.”

“Tis Kicker, Miss. Ever’one calls me that.” Kicker blushed at correcting a lady, but was reassured by Miss Bristow’s friendly smile.

“Thank you for the invaluable briefing, Kicker. I shall remember to be on time for dinner, submit to Mrs. Sheridan’s

dictates, stay out of the line of fire between the two eminent grande dames, and pay strict attention to Pastor Hubble.”

Kicker wondered if the teacher was mocking her, but before the suspicion could fester, Miss Bristow went on.

“So what do you do for entertainment?”

Kicker hesitated. *She mus’ mean what t’other teachers do for fun. She surely don’ mean what a stable hand does.*

“Cook said twas a poetry readin’ las’ weekend, an’ I know some teachers wen’ on a picnic two weeks ago. Oh, and the Grindleshires arrange a trip to London come spring for all the teachers that wan’ ta go. Young Mister Grindleshire helps with that, since he lives in the city.” Kicker shrugged. “Tis about all I know, but Missus Sheridan kin prob’ly tell you more.”

Miss Bristow was quiet for a moment. “And what about you, Kicker? What do you like to do when your work is done?”

Kicker glanced sharply sideways, but the other woman’s expression was calmly inquisitive. She decided that, for whatever reason, Miss Bristow’s interest was genuine.

“I go fishin’ quite a bit. Cook likes it when I bring her fresh trout. An’ sometimes on my half-days, Ol’ Thomas lets me take Banner home to see my family.”

“Banner?”

Kicker warmed to the subject of her favourite horse. “Aye, Miss. Banner, he’s the smartest one in the stables. Times are you look in his eyes an’ you jus’ know he’s fixin’ to put one over on you. So you gotta keep a tight rein, but boy, kin he run. Get up on his back, give him his head, and you feel like you’re ridin’ the wind. If he ain’t bin out all day, I take ’im out for a run in the evenin’.”

“You like to ride, then?”

Kicker was surprised at the wistful tone in Miss Bristow’s voice. “Aye, Miss. I do.”

“I always wanted to ride, but I grew up in London and have worked there since I started teaching, so I never really had the chance. I’ve ridden a little in the parks, of course, but it’s not precisely the same thing.”

“What d’you like to do then, Miss? Fer fun, I mean.”

“Well, I practice those time honoured feminine arts of needlepoint and watercolour, though not terribly well.” Miss Bristow chuckled, but Kicker did not think it was a happy sound. “I also read extensively, and write very bad poetry. In fact one of the courses I’ll be teaching is Eighteenth Century Poetry. Add in Seventeenth Century Literature and Advanced Principles of Deportment, and I shall no doubt enjoy a full life at the Grindleshire Academy for Young Ladies.”

The teacher fell silent, and Kicker pondered the edge of bitterness in the woman’s voice. Unsure what to say, she concentrated on the road, even though the docile chestnut could have plodded the whole way with blinders on.

“Is staff allowed to take the horses out on pleasure rides?”

“Aye, Miss, but not many of ’em do.”

“Your horse...Banner, was it? Do you think I might ride him now and again?”

Kicker blinked and absorbed the undertone of nervous anticipation in the woman’s voice. “Well, he ain’t mine, Miss; he b’longs to the Academy. But if I might say, if you ain’t done much ridin’, you might wanna start with ol’ Cherry here. She’s as gentle as they come.” The chestnut bobbed her head as if aware she was the subject of conversation. “She won’ run off with you like Banner prob’ly would.”

Miss Bristow laid a hand on Kicker’s forearm and almost caused her to drop the reins in surprise. “But I wish to ride the way you described, free and unfettered, as if I had harnessed the wind.”

“I know, Miss, and you kin do that one day, but please start with Cherry here firs’. I don’ wanna see you break your neck or somethin’.”

“Please, will you teach me? Teach me how to ride, teach me to taste the freedom that you so enjoy?”

“A’right, Miss, so long’s you b’gin with Cherry and work up to Banner.”

“Agreed. I put myself entirely in your hands.”

Though the thought of teaching Miss Bristow enthused Kicker, and she enjoyed the teacher’s eagerness, she seriously doubted that Miss Bristow would follow through. Their conversation about horses and riding would simply be something to store away as a pleasant memory.

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When Miss Bristow showed up at the stable the evening after she arrived, Kicker blinked in amazement. *Well, damn me.* She hastened to saddle Cherry. “Sorry I were not ready, Miss. Won’ happ’n agin.”

“You didn’t think I’d make an appearance, did you, Miss Stuart?”

There was distinct amusement in Miss Bristow’s voice, and Kicker blushed. “My mistake, Miss. I promise, it really won’ happ’n agin.”

“Please don’t apologize. The fault is mine if I misled you into thinking I was merely offering a lighthearted suggestion. I promise you that I intend to take your lessons seriously. I hope that if I apply myself, I may be able to keep up with you soon.”

Startled, Kicker met Miss Bristow’s penetrating gaze. “Keep up, Miss?”

“Of course. You will ride with me, won’t you? How could you instruct me if you’re not nearby to offer corrections on my technique?”

While preparing Cherry, Kicker had hazily visualized imparting some instructions before Miss Bristow rode out on her own. It did not occur to her that she would keep the beautiful teacher company. But as she went to saddle Banner, an unbidden, unexpected, and oddly exciting thought put a broad smile on her face.

I got an’ excuse t’ look at her whene’er I like.

~ * * * ~

Much to the surprise of Grindleshire’s small community, the unusual friendship between the teacher and the stable hand flourished. Though the first month of school was busy for everyone at the Academy, the onset of colder weather meant a lightening of Kicker’s duties, and more time for her to indulge her new passion for teaching the teacher. They rode at every opportunity, often for hours at a time.

Alone at night in her small room, Kicker mentally replayed their lessons over and over. Her mind lingered on the laughter they shared, warm smiles Miss Bristow bestowed on her earnest instructor, and Kicker’s favourite reminiscence—any casual touch between the two. Most precious of all was the memory of the day Miss Bristow rode Banner for the first time.

On a blustery November afternoon, Kicker quietly handed the teacher Banner’s reins and took Cherry’s reins for herself. She knew that the pure delight in Miss Bristow’s eyes would be added to her store of midnight memories. They kept their ride short, but Kicker was shivering by the time they turned back. She tried to conceal her discomfort from her companion.

When they came in sight of the Academy, Miss Bristow winningly entreated Kicker. “May I gallop Banner? Oh, do say yes. I am ready—honestly, I am.”

Kicker was finding it more and more difficult to refuse Miss Bristow the slightest request, but in this instance, she was relieved that she did not have to. The teacher had become an accomplished rider under Kicker’s tutelage, and she knew Miss Bristow could handle the big grey.

“Aye, go ’head. I’ll meet you back at the stable.” Kicker smiled as Miss Bristow and Banner raced away. She knew there was no use in attempting to keep up. Cherry would be highly indignant even to be asked for more than a sedate canter.

Kicker laughed aloud when she saw Miss Bristow reach the stable, only to wheel and race back toward her.

“Oh, my heavens, Kicker! It’s like flying. No wonder you love Banner so.”

Miss Bristow’s eyes glowed with excitement, and her face was attractively flushed with the cold and the wind. Kicker’s breath caught, and she could not prevent the violent shiver that overcame her.

Instantly, Miss Bristow reached over and touched Kicker’s hand. “You’re freezing. Why didn’t you tell me how cold you were? Come. We shall return immediately.”

Miss Bristow slowed Banner to keep pace with Cherry as they rode back together. Kicker had never felt such a strange and exhilarating combination of heat and cold. *I mus’ be comin’ down with somethin’.*

Confused, Kicker kept silent as Miss Bristow waxed enthusiastic about the joys of riding Banner. When they reached the stable, Kicker dismounted quickly so she could take Banner’s reins as usual.

Miss Bristow jumped lightly to the ground, then spun and wrapped her shocked companion in an enthusiastic hug. “I can never thank you enough.” She released Kicker, only to laugh aloud and seize her in an even longer hug. “My dear, you have no idea how much our rides have come to mean to me. They are the highlight of my days, and it is all thanks to you. I can never repay you for your kindness, patience, and consideration.”

If Kicker had been able to speak, she would have told Miss Bristow it was entirely her pleasure, but she could not force even the smallest sound from her throat. Fortunately, Miss Bristow did not seem to require an answer. She gave Kicker a cheerful wave and departed for the staff quarters. Kicker stood stock still and watched Miss Bristow walk away.

“You look like you bin pole-axed, girl.”

Kicker glanced over her shoulder at Old Thomas, who stood grinning behind her. “Don’ be daft, ol’ man. She’s jus’ grateful fer the ridin’ lessons.”

“Uh huh. Well, put Banner and Cherry in the barn. Tis a storm blowin’ up.”

~ * * * ~

Several days later Kicker returned to her room after her work was done and found a thick, quilted coat on her bed. There was a note with it, but she was unable to make out the meaning of the graceful script. Still, she had no doubt the gift and note were from Miss Bristow, and she fingered both reverently.

Thrilled by the teacher’s consideration, Kicker could hardly wait until she saw Miss Bristow again. They had made arrangements to meet that day to ride. A soon as she heard the

bell toll the end of the school day, Kicker swiftly saddled Banner and Cherry.

When Miss Bristow did not appear, Kicker waited until dark for her student, passing up dinner for fear of missing the teacher's arrival. Finally she accepted that Miss Bristow was not coming and unsaddled the horses.

Kicker knew that Cook would find her favourite something to eat if she went up to the kitchen, but her stomach churned and her appetite was absent. Profoundly dismayed by Miss Bristow's cavalier treatment, she lay on her hard, narrow bed, thinking.

Maybe that's it, then. Maybe the coat meant g'bye. Maybe now that she knows how to ride, she'll have naught to do with me. Maybe she'll jus' ride with her frien's now. Ain't like I'm but a dirty stable han' anyway.

The thought of being so easily dismissed roiled Kicker's gut. Tears burned her eyes, but she angrily brushed them away. *So be it, then. I don' need her takin' time from my days. I got things to do. Tis better this way. Should ha' tol' her myself not to come anymore.*

A soft tap on her door interrupted Kicker's anguished thoughts.

"Aye?"

The door opened and Miss Bristow poked her head into the room. "Hello, Kicker. If you don't mind the interruption, I thought I'd see how the coat fit."

Kicker swung her legs off the bed and sat up, but averted her face. "It fits fine, but I kin not take it."

Miss Bristow stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. "Why is that? Don't you like it? I just felt so badly about keeping you out in the cold the other day."

"Don' need charity."

There was a long moment of silence. “It wasn’t charity. It was a gift from one friend to another, in gratitude, and the hope that it would keep you warm this winter.”

Kicker refused to look at Miss Bristow, but she heard sadness in the teacher’s voice. *Frien’, eh? Some frien’.*

“Kicker? Kicker, please look at me.”

Kicker studied the floor as if she had never seen it before.

With a sigh, Miss Bristow knelt in front of her. Kicker wanted to throw off the hands that came to rest on her knees, but all she could do was stare at them.

“Please, Kicker. It is apparent that you are deeply angry with me, but I have no idea why. I never meant to offend you with my gift; it came from my heart. I do apologize if it seemed any other way.”

Gentle fingers tilted Kicker’s face up. Miss Bristow’s concerned face swam in front of Kicker’s tear filled eyes.

“Oh, Kicker, what is it? What have I done to upset you so? Please tell me. I cannot make things better between us if you refuse to speak, and I do so want to restore our friendship.”

Kicker blurted angrily, “Frien’ship? What kinda frien’ jus’ don’ show up when she says she will?”

“But, I told you in my note that I would be unable to make our rendezvous today and wished to reschedule for tomorrow. Didn’t you see my message? I set it right on top of the coat. I was sure you wouldn’t miss it.”

Kicker knew the moment Miss Bristow spied the square of paper sticking out from under her pillow. She blushed furiously. *Bless’d Jesus. Bad ’nuff I couldn’t read it. Now she’ll know I kep’ it close anyway. She’ll think...*

Before Kicker could decide what Miss Bristow would think, the teacher extracted the note and stared at it. Unable to bear what might be reflected on Miss Bristow’s face, Kicker tried to look away.

Gentle hands stopped her, cupping her face. Eyes bright with emotion met hers. “I’m a fool. I never thought—I’m so, so sorry.” Soft fingers brushed away Kicker’s tears of shame. “You couldn’t read my note, could you?”

Kicker shook her head wordlessly.

Miss Bristow rose and sat down on the bed. She took one of Kicker’s hands and patted it comfortingly. “The fault is entirely mine. I hope you will forgive me for being so obtuse.”

“I’m not stupid; I jus’ ne’er liked school.”

“Heavens, I never once thought you witless. However, you also never had the advantage of my being your teacher.” Miss Bristow slid an arm around Kicker’s shoulders and hugged her. “I shall teach you, my dear. After all, it is only fair. You have given me a gift of immeasurable value. Allow me to return the favour and initiate you into the beautiful universe of words. Please?”

Kicker blanched. She had loathed the dark, musty, village schoolhouse dominated by a teacher who wielded his thick, leather strap with an unstinting hand. Kicker escaped at every opportunity, despite the punishment she knew would await her unwilling return. Finally her father had stepped in and gruffly ordered that Kicker be allowed to spend her days helping him, rather than be subjected to fruitless attempts to expand her rudimentary education.

Without giving Kicker a chance to object, Miss Bristow continued. “I promise, I’ll make the whole process painless. You’ll see. Not to be immodest, but I’m almost as good a teacher as you are.”

Miss Bristow smiled, and this time Kicker met her gaze. She was acutely aware of their bodies touching and the teacher’s arm around her shoulders.

It was unthinkable to do anything but agree to as much time as possible in this woman’s presence.

Kicker nodded her agreement.

~ * * * ~

“Cook, may I thank you again for allowing Kicker and me the use of your kitchen? It’s been such a boon during these cold months, and I do believe I far prefer teaching here to my classroom.”

Kicker hid a grin. She knew that Cook had succumbed as readily to Miss Bristow’s charms as she had, and would have granted her the run of the whole kitchen if the teacher had asked. As it was, this warm corner, tucked away from the whirl of activity in the rest of the kitchen, had become Kicker’s favourite spot in the Academy. Here, the winter months had seen her literacy skills expand by leaps and bounds under Miss Bristow’s attentive tutelage.

I ne’er thought learnin’ would be so... pleasant.

Cook set cups of tea in front of the teacher and her faithful student. “Guess wi’ the weather turnin’ nice agin, ye’ll be back out in the gardens soon, eh?”

“Thank you, Cook. Yes, it was so lovely today that I almost suggested we take our lessons and go riding.” Miss Bristow looked at Kicker over the rim of the steaming cup. “You’ve a half-day tomorrow, don’t you? How would it be if I pack our books and we take Banner and Cherry out for a ride?”

“I could sen’ ye wi’ a picnic, if ye wan’.”

“Why, thank you, Cook. That would be lovely. Kicker, what do you say?”

Kicker had planned to ride Banner over to see Adam and his family, as she had not seen them in two months, but she did not hesitate. “Aye, twould be nice.” *I’ll go see Adam nex’ week.*

~ * * * ~

The following afternoon, Kicker waited at the stables with Cook's bountiful picnic basket and a blanket both tied to Cherry's saddle. Miss Bristow was prompt, and graciously insisted that Kicker ride Banner. Without discussion, they headed directly for a clearing by the river that had become their favourite spot to stop a while and talk.

By the time they reached the clearing, Kicker found she was unaccountably nervous. She was not unprepared for her lessons. In the five months since Miss Bristow began tutoring her, Kicker had often fallen asleep after a hard day's work with a book on her chest or her slate close at hand. But after she released the horses to graze, Kicker saw her hands shake as she spread the blanket on the grass.

When she took her seat next to Miss Bristow, she thrust her hands under her thighs to conceal their trembling. There was nothing she could do about her shortened breath, except to hope that her teacher did not notice.

Miss Bristow extracted the book they had been working on, and opened it to a page she had already marked. "So, where did we leave off yesterday?"

"You were talkin' about poetry."

"That's right, I was. Lord Byron, to be precise. Let me read you a passage, and then we'll discuss it." Miss Bristow's eyes barely glanced at the page as she began to recite.

Her rapt audience almost missed the meaning of the verse because of the way the teacher's soft, husky voice caressed the evocative words.

*And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow*

*But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!*

Kicker felt that she could drown in the eyes fixed so intently on her own. *Bless'd Jesus. What am I doin'?* She fought a wave of excitement and panic so intense that she feared she might swoon at the teacher's feet.

When Miss Bristow paused and looked inquiringly at Kicker, it was all she could do to speak. Clearing her throat once, then again, she asked, "Could you read it one more time, please?"

With an enigmatic smile, Miss Bristow read the passage again. The last line echoed in Kicker's mind, and the rest of the afternoon's lessons were lost in one overwhelming question. *Did she pick this one special for me? Is she tryin' to tell me—*

At which point Kicker rejected the question as nonsense, and tried to focus on the lessons, and later, the picnic. When the afternoon ended, Kicker was as exhausted as if she had worked a fifteen hour day. For the first time, it was more a relief than a disappointment to return to the stable.

Thankfully Cook had packed an expansive lunch for the two, so Kicker skipped dinner and retired to her room. She had a lot to think about.

~ * * * ~

A week later on her half-day, Kicker rode over to visit her brother and his growing family. Adam took her for a walk in the fields behind his small cottage. They hadn't gone far before he began to gently chide her.

"So, little sister, why is't you've not been to see any of us in more'n two months? I know how close you've gotten to

your Academy frien's o'er the years, but you got blood family cares 'bout you too. You're getting' more and more nieces and nephews all'a time, an' you don' e'en know half of 'em."

Kicker looked up indignantly to see a half-grin on his bearded face, and she elbowed him. "Not true. It ain' bin that long."

"Has too. Young Jeremiah was just gone four when you las' came by."

Kicker thought about that as she automatically quickened her step to keep up with her brother's long stride. *Tis bin that long?* Ruefully she had to admit that it had. Kicker spent her half-days with Miss Bristow, if the teacher requested her presence. Lately it seemed that the dedicated teacher was eager to get all the time possible with Kicker to devote to lessons. It was purely guilt that had led Kicker to excuse herself today. She knew it had been too long since she had seen her family.

"I guess I kinda los' track of time. Sometimes, I can barely believe so many years have passed since I lef' here. Seems like twere jus' yesterday, but here's both of us long grown and gone from Da's hearth."

Kicker was unwilling to confess, even to Adam, that in these halcyon days nothing held more importance than spending every possible moment with her lovely teacher. "I'll try to do better, honest."

Adam stopped and turned to face her but Kicker refused to meet his eyes and toed the dirt. "'Fess up. What's goin' on?" When Kicker remained silent, a surprised, then delighted look came over Adam's face. "Kicker! Did you meet someone? Has someone finally stolen your heart?"

"No. Of course not." Kicker was dismayed at the thought of having her feelings for Miss Bristow hauled into the harsh light of day. This was Adam, who had loved and protected her for as

long as she could remember, but even so, she couldn't share this with him.

Adam regarded her quietly, then turned to resume their walk. After a long silence, he spoke softly, his voice troubled. "Tis a'right, you know. I mean if there was some... someone. Jus'...be really careful, a'right? Tis prob'ly not somethin' you should talk about anyway. Not e'eryone would understan', you know?"

Kicker nodded mutely, and was deeply grateful when he changed the subject. For the rest of their walk, they discussed their youngest brother Brian's flight from the family home to join his two eldest brothers in the army. Later that day, when Kicker rode Banner back to the Academy, she finally allowed herself to contemplate what Adam said. *Would he be shocked if I tol' him how I feel for Miss Bristow?* Kicker shook her head in confusion. *What do I feel?*

She did not know how to define their relationship. What Kicker did know was that the class gulf between teacher and stable hand was sharply defined and never to be crossed. Their unlikely friendship was tolerated only because Miss Bristow was regarded as something of a harmless eccentric. She was a talented and popular teacher, but one with an unusual fascination for riding that Kicker facilitated on demand.

Kicker did not dare to aspire to more than what they already had. She never sought Miss Bristow out between their scheduled lessons, though it was not unusual for the teacher to stroll down to the stables at unexpected times. Kicker would often look up from grooming Banner or one of her other charges, to find Miss Bristow watching her from just inside the stable door. Sometimes they would speak, and sometimes Miss Bristow would simply give her an inscrutable smile and go on her way.

Kicker knew the teacher was fond of her. Many times Miss Bristow had urged Kicker to call her by her Christian name when they were alone. But fearful of forgetting her place in front of others, Kicker had not allowed herself to do so, though she often rolled the lovely name over in her mind in the solitude of her bed.

Madelyn. Madelyn Elizabeth. Madelyn Elizabeth Bristow.

One day, Kicker had been too busy to go to the kitchen for lunch. Though she'd known Cook would bend the kitchen rules for her, she hadn't wanted to put her friend in a difficult position. So instead, Kicker had done something she'd tried to work her nerve up to do for weeks. Nervously, she'd made her way toward the academic wing. She'd known Miss Bristow conducted afternoon class on seventeenth century literature at this time, and which classroom her teacher would be using.

Kicker had become such an integral part of the school support system over the years that no one questioned her presence anywhere on the grounds. Still, she could not help feeling profoundly guilty about what she was about to do. And if she were stopped for any reason, Kicker had been certain her face would clearly broadcast her feelings. Much to her chagrin, it always did.

Kicker had reached a grove of trees and glanced around. There had been no one in the immediate area, so she'd quickly shinnied up an ancient oak tree. She'd settled herself on a branch and looked around. It was as she had hoped—a perfect place for her purposes. No one would be able to detect her presence, but she could see directly into Miss Bristow's second floor classroom. Though she had been too far away to hear anything, she could watch Miss Bristow's animated lecture.

At one point, Miss Bristow had laughed heartily at something a student said, and Kicker felt her heart fill with emotion. *She's...beautiful. No, more than jus' beautiful... she's*

b'witchin' like...enchantin' e'en... She'd shaken her head in frustration. Words were so inadequate.

For weeks afterwards, Kicker had often taken her lunch break at that hour, until Cook chastised her for missing so many meals. Nervously, Kicker had recalled Adam's warning, knowing she should be more careful. She'd made more frequent appearances in the kitchen from then on, but had been helpless against the powerful pull of the oak tree and Miss Bristow's class.

~ * * * ~

Early May arrived, and with it Mr. Grindleshire's only son, Merrick, came to make arrangements for the staff's annual weekend in the city. The evening that Mr. Grindleshire the younger arrived, Miss Bristow was at the stable, inspecting the latest batch of kittens the stable cat had birthed.

"Ain't they adorable?" Much to her delight, Kicker found that though there were eight kittens, she and Miss Bristow often ended up stroking the same one. Their fingers could not avoid the occasional accidental touch.

"They are indeed. Do you think—"

Whatever Miss Bristow had been about to say was lost in the commotion of a rider approaching fast and hard. Kicker jumped up from the hay and rushed to the stable door. She frowned as she saw who was galloping up the long, curving entrance road.

Kicker did not approve of Merrick Grindleshire, though she would never be so brash as to say so. The man rode horses hard, with little regard for their welfare. Kicker was only grateful that he never again requisitioned Banner after he'd been tossed by the big grey gelding a couple of years earlier. It had taken Old Thomas' intervention with the senior Mr.

Grindleshire to prevent Banner from being put down as incorrigible. Kicker never forgave the arrogant young man.

Cook reported that Merrick was overheard bragging about his intention to acquire a motor car. Kicker uttered a small prayer that he would do so soon, and spare the magnificent animals unlucky enough to fall into his hands.

Kicker brushed off the straw and walked quickly to the main house, well aware that Merrick would never deign to bring his mount down to the stable. He was more likely to simply abandon it where he dismounted, and it would be on Kicker's head if the horse ended up amidst the flower gardens.

Miss Bristow fell into step beside her. "Who is our visitor?"

Kicker frowned as she noticed the curiosity with which the teacher regarded the new arrival. "That's Mister Grindleshire's son, Miss. I expect he's come about the teachers' trip to the city. Since he lives there mos' of the time, his da makes him help with the staff weekend. Says tis good for the teachers' morals or some such."

A soft chuckle greeted her words. "I think it may well be their morale that is to be raised. Hopefully their morals are already in high order."

Kicker scowled. She had worked hard to improve, but she knew her rough ways still needed a lot of refining. Worse, Miss Bristow seemed more interested in the stranger than in her injured feelings.

Merrick appeared to be reciprocally interested. After greeting his father, who had come out to meet him, the newcomer turned to wait for the approaching women, his eyes fixed on Miss Bristow.

Without a word, Kicker parted from the teacher and made her way to Merrick's horse, which was still snorting hard from the exertion of their arrival. She ran her hands over the

sweating flanks and listened to the conversation between the three.

The older man's voice boomed cheerfully. "Ah, there you are, Miss Bristow. I want you to meet my son, just down from London for a visit. Miss Madelyn Bristow, this is my youngest child, Merrick. Merrick, Miss Bristow joined us last summer, and has established herself as an excellent teacher, as well as a very promising poet in her own right."

"Enchanted, my dear Miss Bristow. It is truly a pleasure to meet you."

Kicker clenched her teeth at the smooth, ingratiating voice.

"The pleasure is mine, Mr. Grindleshire. Are you down for long?"

"Well, I had not planned to be, but perhaps I may find reason to extend my visit. And please, call me Merrick."

Kicker winced as she pictured the man's unctuous smile. She glanced under the horse's neck and saw Merrick still holding her teacher's hand. As she watched, he drew Miss Bristow's arm through his and guided her up the stairs.

Merrick's buttery tones floated back to Kicker. "So tell me, Madelyn, if I may call you that, do you ever give readings of your poetry? I have quite a passion for verse myself. At one time, I fancied myself another Browning."

Miss Bristow's response was inaudible as the trio entered the front door. Kicker stood numbly and felt as if Banner had just kicked her in the stomach. Her beloved teacher had not even bade her goodnight.

Glowing, Kicker gathered the horse's reins and led him to the stable. Her mind reeled at how casually she had been disregarded. Her heart was filled with a sense of betrayal, though her mind argued that she had no right to feel so.

Leading the horse first to the water trough, Kicker monitored his intake closely as she considered the man she

could not help regarding as competition. *I s'pose some might think him han'some enough. His hair is a'ready thin, though, an' I don' trust his eyes. They're...shifty.*

“From the cut of his vest, he’s bin eatin’ a bit too well these days, too.” Kicker emphatically pulled the horse away from the trough and scowled as she led him into the barn.

“Did you say somepin’, Kicker?” Old Thomas asked as he passed her by. She shook her head and began to unsaddle the tired animal.

“I see the lad is down from the city.” Old Thomas grinned and jerked his thumb up at the mansion. “That means the fillies will be tumblin’ all over themselves to catch ’is eye. Wisht he’d just pick one of ’em and settle down so we don’ have to go through this foolishness ever’ time the princeling comes back to the school. Whene’er his royal highness visits, they’re all atwitter up there, busy settin’ their caps to snare him.”

Along with the downstairs staff, Kicker had hung avidly on Cook’s tales of the younger Mr. Grindleshire’s legendary dalliances each time he visited. It had meant nothing more to her than a moment’s entertainment...until now.

Kicker curried the horse with vigorous strokes and let her mind stray to the unthinkable. *Will she fall under his spell, questionable though it be? Surely not. Miss Bristow’s far too smart to be taken in. Tis not like she’s some callow girl to fall for a han’some face and good manners...is she?* Kicker stopped with a horrified look on her face. *What if she does fall for him? Will she marry an’ leave for the city?*

Kicker had no experience with affairs of the heart, and her fears plagued her long after she bade Old Thomas goodnight. He headed for his cottage and his wife, and she took a seat on the top rail of the paddock fence.

By the dim light of a scant moon, Kicker’s gaze flickered across the row of lights on the top floor of the school. She

counted off until she reached Miss Bristow's window, illuminated brightly by the gaslight within. Being very familiar with her habits, Kicker knew that normally the light would be dimmed by now. She did not know if she should be troubled by that break in routine, or pleased that Miss Bristow was safely in the solitude of her room.

But what if she's not in her room? What if she jus' lef' a light on, knowin' she'd be back later than usual an' in the dark?

Kicker tortured herself for over an hour, then heaved a sigh of relief when Miss Bristow's window finally went dark. Sliding off the rail, she became aware that she had been perched in the uncomfortable spot far too long. She grimaced and tried to coax some feeling back into her numb flesh as she headed for bed herself. But even in her sanctuary, Kicker's thoughts did not allow her any peace.

Over and over Kicker pondered the improvements she had made in herself these past months. She'd studied intensely; her literacy skills were hard won, but solid. She had taken to bathing on a frequent basis so as not to offend Miss Bristow's ladylike senses. She washed her clothes more often and spoke more carefully, even when not around the teacher.

Kicker coaxed choice bits from Cook to take with them on their excursions. And she taught Miss Bristow horsemanship with as much dedication as she herself was taught grammar, spelling, and composition.

Cook and Old Thomas had noticed the changes, with the former bestowing approval for the betterment while the latter teased her about the reasons for her drive toward self-improvement. Yet it did not seem to make any difference to the only person that mattered, at least as far as Kicker could see.

She treats me kin'ly, jus' like she has since we met. Miss Bristow offered encouragement and praise in lavish measure,

but Kicker had watched her do the same with her other students.

Sometimes Kicker could almost convince herself that Miss Bristow regarded her as more than just another student, perhaps even as a friend, but then the harsh reality of their respective positions set in, and Kicker chastised herself for being so foolish.

Wracked with unspoken longings and unfulfilled dreams, Kicker spent a sleepless night. She rose at dawn to begin her duties with a heavy heart and sullen demeanour. Even Old Thomas could not elicit a smile when he brought her some of his wife's breakfast cakes wrapped in brown paper.

When Miss Bristow came down to the stables the next evening, Kicker silently saddled Banner for her and stepped aside.

Miss Bristow regarded her with puzzlement. "Won't you join me?"

"Got too much to do. Can't be wastin' time goin' willy-nilly across the fields."

Kicker was too lost in her misery to notice the distress her gruff words caused, as Miss Bristow slowly left the paddock alone.

To her complete lack of surprise, Merrick arrived at the stable moments after Miss Bristow departed, and ordered his horse to be saddled at once. Kicker barely had time to tighten the cinch before he swung up and galloped off in the direction Miss Bristow had taken. Bitter, she glared after him. *Should ha' lef' the cinch loose.*

When the two of them rode back together, Kicker stubbornly kept her back turned while she worked on a bit that had separated from an old bridle.

"Girl!"

The peremptory demand was impossible to ignore, and Kicker slowly turned to face the couple.

“Her name is Kicker.”

Kicker assumed the cool displeasure in Miss Bristow’s voice was directed at her earlier abruptness. She refused to meet the eyes which regarded her sadly.

“Mmm? Oh, whatever. Kicker, then, come take our horses.” Merrick swung down, and turned his attention to his companion. He flattered Miss Bristow with his brightest smile and offered his hand. “You ride very well, my dear, though I’m surprised that you shun the customary sidesaddle. I’ve never seen a lady ride thus. I would think it would be difficult to find the appropriate dress.”

Miss Bristow accepted the proffered hand and dismounted gracefully. Kicker took the reins of both horses and led them away. Her ears strained to hear the couple’s conversation even as she castigated herself for caring.

“I find I can control my mount better astride, and I simply modified some of my clothing to accommodate my preferred style.”

“Well, you certainly maintain excellent control of that beast.” A note of petulance crept into Merrick’s voice. “Really though, do you think you should chance riding that grey? I happen to know that he can be very headstrong and highly unpredictable. Perhaps you should select a different mount for our next ride.”

Kicker focused on the man’s assertion of them riding together again and failed to detect the chilly tones of Miss Bristow’s voice as they moved away.

“I assure you, Mr. Grindleshire, Banner is a delight to ride, and has always been utterly well mannered for me.”

“Merrick, please, my dear Madelyn. And of course I do not for one moment doubt your skill, but...”

The voices faded across the lawn, and with a sigh Kicker began to groom the horses. With each stroke of the curry comb, she tried to console herself. *Twill be back to the city b'fore long. Countryside's too quiet for the likes of the grand Mister Grindleshire, that's sure and certain.*

~ * * * ~

The next four weeks were the longest of Kicker's life. The teachers' excursion to the city came and went, and still the younger Mr. Grindleshire lingered. Talk in the kitchen revolved around how smitten the Headmaster's son was by the beautiful Miss Bristow. Betting was fierce among the household staff as to the length of time it would be until the Academy hosted a splendid wedding. Based on the lustful looks bestowed on Miss Bristow by her ardent swain, odds ran heavily that a marriage would take place before summer's end.

In the days following the conclusion of the school year, Kicker and Old Thomas were kept busy ferrying students and their baggage into town to catch the trains that dispersed them to their families. With little time for reflection, Kicker was nonetheless keenly aware that staff would be leaving next. A few of the older, single teachers stayed on through the summer, as did some of the household staff. Most left, however, to return at the end of summer before the new school year began.

Kicker had not had a private conversation with Miss Bristow since Merrick's arrival. She had no idea what her plans were, though she could guess from the kitchen gossip.

One evening, sick at heart, Kicker took advantage of a lull in the constant travel between the Academy and the town to take Banner out for a ride.

She rode hard, urging the big horse to a gallop. As Kicker strove for an elusive peace, she gave Banner his head and let

the wind whip the tears from her eyes. When finally the horse slowed to a canter, then to a walk, she wasn't surprised to see he'd brought her down to the river. It was their spot—hers and Miss Bristow's, but she could not remember the last time they'd visited it.

“Aye, you know, don'cha, old boy.” Kicker slid off Banner's back and patted his damp neck affectionately. He nuzzled her as she knotted the reins loosely over his withers. The gelding ambled off to graze while Kicker walked to the edge of the bank.

Kicker stared at the river and reflected on the past year. She wondered wearily if she would be able to stand working at the Academy once Miss Bristow became Mrs. Merrick Grindleshire. It would be agony to see her beloved teacher on the man's arm, his possessive, victorious smirk clear evidence that she now completely and irrevocably belonged to him.

“Like there was e'er any chance...”

Kicker lacked the words to define her inchoate longings. The most she had ever allowed herself was the fantasy of years of cherished friendship with Miss Bristow. Perhaps one day she might allow herself to call the other woman by her Christian name when they were alone. She did not dare dream of taking any further liberties. But even without substance, unformed desires haunted Kicker, denied her rest, and deprived her days of the harmony that had characterized them these past seven years.

Lost in her thoughts and hypnotized by the turbulent water, Kicker failed to notice the sound of an approaching horse or Banner's welcoming whinny. When she finally sensed another horse nearing the river, Kicker spun around, only to gape at the sight of Miss Bristow on Cherry's back. She automatically glanced past her, looking for the woman's inevitable companion, but there was no sign of Merrick Grindleshire.

Kicker pulled her wits together and hurried to her side, taking Cherry's reins as Miss Bristow slid to the ground.

"Is e'erythin' a'right, Miss? Am I needed back at the Academy?"

Miss Bristow looked at her angrily. "At the Academy? No...not at the Academy."

Uneasy at the teacher's unusual demeanour, Kicker stepped out of the way and allowed Cherry to amble to Banner's side and the teacher to stride to the riverbank.

Miss Bristow said nothing as she stared into the waters.

In nervous uncertainty, Kicker stood quietly to the side. She fumbled for something to say, saddened at the unease that had replaced their once warm, effortless rapport. Finally, she could stand the silence no longer. "Are you a'right, Miss?"

Miss Bristow's shoulders tightened and her head snapped up.

Kicker took an involuntary step backwards.

"All right? Yes, I suppose you could say I was fine. Probably better than fine, really. After all, it's not every day that a woman is proposed to by a wealthy young man from a fine family, is it?" Madelyn's voice was tight and controlled.

Kicker froze. So Merrick had finally done it. Madelyn would be his, and all the amorphous dreams that had haunted her nights through this glorious spring would be as dust in the stable yard.

Chapter 2

Kicker's throat closed with grief. She started to back away before a thought halted her retreat. *If Merrick proposed t'night, what is Miss Bristow doin' out here? Shouldn't she be celebratin' with her betrothed's family and fellow teachers?*

Confused, Kicker shook her head as Miss Bristow turned to stare at her.

"What? You don't believe that Merrick Grindleshire would propose to me, my young friend? You don't believe that I would be a fine catch for such a gentleman?"

The words were light but it seemed to a baffled Kicker as if the teacher mocked herself. "Uh, no, Miss. I think you're a real catch, and anyone would be lucky to have you."

Never taking her eyes from Kicker's face, Miss Bristow advanced on the flustered woman. "Anyone? Really? Then you would approve if someone, say...the Prince of Wales, for instance, was to propose a union?"

The Prince? But I thought...well, din't Mister Grindleshire jus' propose? Aloud, Kicker mumbled her agreement, disconcerted by the intent glitter in Miss Bristow's eyes.

"So if you believe that I'm good enough to marry a prince, then it follows that I should be good enough for almost anyone—is that what you're saying?"

Miss Bristow was close enough that Kicker could feel the warmth of her body and smell the familiar scent of her lavender toilet water.

Kicker nodded, not trusting her voice.

Miss Bristow's expression suddenly gentled and she reached out to caress Kicker's face. She drew her fingers

lightly over a tanned cheekbone and down a strong jaw to linger on lips that parted unconsciously. Her voice softened. “And if I’m good enough for those illustrious gentlemen, why then am I not good enough for you?”

“For me?” Kicker was amazed that she was able to produce even that squeak. “But, Miss, I’m not... I mean I’m not e’en fit’n...”

Miss Bristow sighed deeply and took Kicker’s head firmly in both hands. “Yes, you are, dearest. You most surely are. God help me, I know the risks far too well. But I can no longer deny what I feel ... and what I have prayed night after night that you feel as well.” Miss Bristow lowered her head and gave Kicker her first kiss, soft, sweet, but insistent.

Shocked, Kicker stood passively for a long moment, but as her lips absorbed the feel of the warm, demanding mouth that covered her own, her entire body began to respond. With growing urgency, Kicker strained against her, engulfed by a rushing torrent of sensations and emotions. Convinced that she was seconds from bursting into flame, Kicker was grateful when Miss Bristow broke their kiss with a joyful laugh.

“I knew you would be a quick learner. You were always my best student.”

“Miss Bristow—”

“No. You cannot kiss me like that and still call me ‘Miss Bristow’, dearest.” Her voice was mirthful, but firm.

“Madelyn...” Kicker rolled the sound on her tongue. “Madelyn, what about...him?”

“Let him find his own lady, dearest. I found mine many months ago, though she is a stubborn sort and refused to see what lay before her very eyes.” Madelyn’s voice was teasing, and part of Kicker simply wanted to let the unpleasantness go and return to kissing, but she had to know for certain, had to hear the words.

“You turned him down, Miss...Madelyn?”

Madelyn’s fingers stroked Kicker’s shoulders and elicited a sigh as they traced a path down the strong back. When those mischievous hands tugged her shirt from her trousers and slipped underneath, Kicker’s eyes closed in delight.

Only a tiny vestige of her stubborn nature kept Kicker from surrendering without another word, but she forced herself to speak. “Mister Grindleshire? What about him?”

Madelyn’s hands stilled and she rested her cheek against Kicker’s hair. “I suppose I do owe you the whole story.”

Madelyn eased her hands from under the thin shirt, took Kicker’s hand and led her to the bank of the river. She tugged Kicker down to sit beside her as they dangled their feet above the water’s edge.

“I suppose the long and the short of it is that Merrick asked me to marry him tonight, and I declined the honour he obviously felt he had bestowed upon me.” Madelyn turned her head to look at Kicker. “I turned him down for several reasons, but the main one is that I’m in love with another.”

“Another?” For an instant, Kicker wondered if there was a man back in the city that she did not know about. *Did I misunderstand?*

Madelyn chuckled at the confusion on Kicker’s face. “You, my sweet girl. I’ve been in love with you for ever so long.”

“But, you spent all your time with him. I thought sure you was goin’ to marry him.” Even as Kicker protested, part of her mind told her to simply shut up and accept Madelyn’s declaration at face value. “You e’en went to the city with him.”

Madelyn shot Kicker a dry look. “And his parents, and twenty-two other women. Initially I tried to bow out, but all the Grindleshires put pressure on me. Finally I decided it would actually be a good opportunity to take care of some matters with my family’s barrister.” She squeezed Kicker’s hand.

“Besides, by then you were avoiding me. I couldn’t even get you to come for a ride with me.”

Kicker hung her head and focused intently on the small eddy at the edge of the water. “He was always hangin’ ’round, and I din’t want to get in the way.”

“Do you think so little of me that you would believe for even a moment that I could possibly be interested in such a pompous, tedious, simpering ass?”

Stung, Kicker shot back, “He’s rich, an’ han’some, and all t’other teachers were after him. Wasn’t hard to see he was smitten with you. Figured all he had to do was crook his finger an’ you’d agree to marry him.”

“Marry him? Never. I have no desire to become some man’s chattel—to lose control over my body and mind and property; to be dictated to like some feeble minded child for the rest of my life; to never again taste the freedom that you have shown me. That I should take his name, bend to his will, and go to his bed...would you wish that for me?”

“No. But t’others seem to want it right enough. They was always fallin’ all over him, like he was kin to the Queen.”

“And I’m sure that one of them will make Merrick a fine wife, but it isn’t going to be me.” Exasperation was clear in her tone, but then Madelyn’s voice softened. “I far prefer a most handsome lass who has thick, dark curls that my fingers long to get lost in; big, black eyes that look out on the world with such innocence, intelligence, and curiosity; and a mind and heart that have drawn my own from the first moment we met.” Madelyn took Kicker’s hands tightly in her own. “I know all your objections before you even voice them, dearest. It’s not as if we can march up to Pastor Hubble’s door and demand that he marry us. Nor can we spend a night together without causing a scandal at the Academy. Society would not approve of us even being friends, were it not for our unique situation here. In truth,

dearest, by my words and actions this night, I'm trusting you beyond what I've ever trusted another soul. Women like us—women in love with each other—are so terribly vulnerable. Should one word of what has passed between us reach other ears, we stand to lose everything—reputation, position, potentially even our freedom.”

Kicker nodded soberly. She had never dared to dream of more than friendship, but now that Madelyn had opened the gates to far greater aspirations, the impossibility of it all began to sink in. “Tis hopeless, is it not?”

She expected to be told that they would have to content themselves with stolen moments, and was startled by Madelyn's next words.

“Perhaps not, dearest. There may be a way, but it will not be easy.” For the first time Kicker saw uncertainty on her face, but it cleared and Madelyn continued in a resolute voice. “I saw early on that Merrick had set his mind on marrying me, though I tried to dissuade him. From what I swiftly learned of him, I knew he would not take rejection gracefully.”

Kicker thought of how Merrick had tried to have Banner put down for throwing him, and nodded.

Madelyn released Kicker's hands, rose to her feet and paced back and forth in the grass. Kicker was reminded of all the times she had watched Madelyn in front of her classroom—instructing, questioning, and debating.

“The fact of the matter is, when I turned him down tonight, I as much as ended my tenure here at Grindleshire's. They won't have me back after I refused the honour of marrying their precious son and heir.”

Startled, Kicker blinked at Madelyn. She had not considered that aspect, but as soon as Madelyn put it into words, she knew it for the truth. The Grindleshires—mother, father, and five older sisters—had spoiled and doted on the

only male scion since his birth. They would not tolerate the continued presence of any woman who so greatly insulted him.

Springing to her feet, Kicker stepped into Madelyn's path, and slipped her arms around Madelyn's waist. "Then what is our plan?"

Madelyn stared at her, a newborn smile growing. "Oh, I've chosen well, dearest. I could not ask for a truer companion, nor stouter heart in what is to be done."

Kicker appreciated the words, but she appreciated the kiss that punctuated them even more. This time they took their time, exploring each other avidly until they sank down to the grass, bodies entwined. When at long last they stilled, bodies nestled and touches lingering, they found that the long summer's evening had begun to darken.

"We mus' get back soon." Kicker did not really wish to move an inch. "They might start to worry."

"I know, dearest." Madelyn's languid voice sharpened urgently. "We don't have much time. Merrick will no doubt have informed his parents by now. I'm sure I shall be summoned to Mr. Grindleshire's office to be dismissed on the morrow."

Reluctantly Kicker drew just far enough out of her companion's embrace to rise up on her elbow so she could gaze down on the Madelyn's face. Fighting the urge to steal another kiss, she repeated her earlier question. "What is our plan?"

"While living in London, I was involved with a group working towards women's suffrage." Madelyn flashed Kicker a wry grin. "Actually, that's why I was asked to leave my last post. The Headmistress feared I might corrupt the impressionable young minds in my care."

"You're a Suffragette?" Kicker was surprised. She had heard of the movement, but it meant little to her.

“Well, an inactive member of late, but I’ve kept in touch with several old friends who were also involved in the movement. I believe one of them may hold the key to our freedom.” Excited, Madelyn sat up. “Dearest, have you ever given any thought to leaving England, to sailing to a new country and making a life there?”

Leave England? Leave Adam and my family and Grindleshire’s? Kicker shook her head. She had assumed that she would always live and work within a few miles of the place she had been born. “I’ve barely the money to take the train to the city. I don’ know what it costs to take ship, but—”

Madelyn leaned forward and rested her hands on Kicker’s thighs. “I have enough for both of us, plus a stake to get us started in the West, where my friend and her husband have settled. Kicker, that’s what I did when I went to London. I settled my affairs and booked us passage to Canada. The ship is to sail a few weeks from now.”

“Canada?” Kicker was dumbfounded. Without warning, she was being asked to uproot her whole life. As much as she had yearned after Madelyn, she was not entirely clear on what future was even possible with her. *I ne’er e’en heard of two women lovin’ an’ makin’ a life t’gether.*

For the first time Kicker hesitated, and doubt crept in. A small voice reminded her that even if Madelyn had to leave the Academy, she did not. Kicker could go on working in the stables for the rest of her life, if she chose to do so. *I got frien’s here. Cook treats me like her own daughter. I kin see Adam reg’lar. Tis work I like too, an’ Ol’ Thomas thinks I half walk on water. I kin ride Banner pretty much any time I choose...*

As always, Madelyn read Kicker easily. “I know the magnitude of what I ask, dearest, but think of the possibilities. We’re in the last months of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century will be one of untold wonders, and we could

welcome it in a young land, a growing land, one that is part of the Empire, too. It won't be easy, but the opportunities are endless for those with the courage and determination to seize them. If we find we don't take to life in Canada, we can always try America or even Australia. We can do whatever we want, Kicker. Just you and I, together."

"Why d'you think twill be any easier for us to be t'gether, even there?"

"Because we can reinvent ourselves, dearest. We can pose as sisters, and no one will question our living together. There is a desperate need for teachers, according to my friend, and your skill with horses and the forge will always be in high demand."

Kicker mulled over Madelyn's words. "No one will believe we're sisters. We don' look alike, an' we sure don' talk alike. What happens when some man sets his eye on you again? We'll have to keep movin' all the time."

"Cousins, then, and we will keep working on your speech. You've already made wonderful progress, dearest. As for men courting me, I shall wear a ring and say my husband is a soldier on foreign duty. He has sent me on ahead and intends to join me once his tour is done. After a suitable period, I'll receive word of his passing and enter a period of mourning. Like our good Queen, I will always honour his memory, and refuse to ever countenance offers of marriage."

Kicker stared at her in amazement. "You've got it all worked out, have you not?"

"Merrick made no effort to conceal his intentions almost from the start, dearest. I had to think quickly."

"An' you say you booked us both passage? You were that certain of me?" Kicker was not sure if she should feel taken for granted.

At that, Madelyn's gaze dropped. "No, I wasn't certain at all. I only hoped and prayed that you felt the same as I did. If

you feel...if you do not...well, I can probably sell your ticket to someone else who is looking to book passage, but I am going, dearest.”

“I don’ know, Madelyn. I don’ know what to tell you. I do love you, but to leave all I have ever known...tis a harsh thing you ask of me.”

“I know, and I wouldn’t ask it of you so abruptly had we more time, but the hours grow short.” Madelyn sighed deeply. “I’ll try to delay my leaving one day, to give you more time to decide. If you still haven’t reached a decision, I’ll give you my address in London before I leave. If you decide to take a chance on me...on us, come to me by the twenty-second, or it will be too late.”

Madelyn stood, and Kicker followed. The ride back to the Academy was quiet, both women lost in deep thought. Neither spoke until they reached the stables and dismounted.

“Whatever you decide, please know that it will not change my love for you.” Before Kicker could reach for her, Madelyn turned away and returned to the Academy and her living quarters.

Numb, Kicker cared for the horses, ignoring Banner’s injured look at the cursory brushing she administered before leaving them fed and stabled for the night. She flopped on her bed and tried to quiet her mind as she considered her decision. Wild and conflicting emotions finally drove her from her stifling room to the old oak tree that had so often sheltered her.

Kicker climbed to her usual post, stared up at the stars and wrestled with her decision. *Tis all so sudden. Can she truly love me? If I gi’ it all for her, my home, my family, my work, my country e’en, will I e’er regret it? Twill be no turnin’ back from this choice. I know that well.*

But just when doubts threatened to overwhelm her, Kicker closed her eyes and let the memory of Madelyn’s kisses

inflame her body. *To touch her—to be touched so, could I live wi'out that e'er again? Bless'd Jesus. What she does t'me ... ne'er did I think to feel this way about anyone.*

Impulsively, Kicker pushed herself up off the branch, driven by an overwhelming need to hurry to Madelyn's side. Then another thought occurred to her and she sank back down against the tree's trunk. *What if I'm naught but a brief fancy? In all ways she is so far 'bove me. Tis passin' strange such a lady would settle on one such as me. An' havin' done so, havin' claimed me heart and body, will she then grow bored wi' me? Abandon me when another more comely, more learn'd, more ... e'rything catches her eye? Will she forsake me in a strange land?*

An unexpected tear fell from Kicker's eye as she contemplated that dire possibility, and a resurgence of uncertainty quelled her desire.

Finally, exhausted by hours of fierce internal debate, Kicker admonished herself aloud, "Grow up, you feckless whelp. Will you hang on to your family's coatstrings, muckin' out stables for the rest of your life whilst the woman you love sails alone to a new land? Or will you take the life she offers when you know bloody well tis what you want?"

As simply as that, Kicker made up her mind. She would miss Adam terribly, as well as the rest of her family, Old Thomas and Cook, but she would learn to live with their loss. But if Madelyn left without her...that Kicker did not think she could ever learn to live with.

Cheered, Kicker scrambled out of her haven, determined to tell Madelyn that instant. She was undaunted by the fact that she had only been to the Madelyn's room once, the day she brought her from the train station the previous year and deposited the new teacher's trunk in her quarters. Kicker had

counted the windows of the teachers' dormitory by night often enough to be certain she knew her way.

Kicker entered by the same side door she had watched Madelyn disappear within only hours before. It occurred to her that it would be very hard to explain her presence should any of the staff wake up and confront her. So once inside the dark, quiet building, she climbed the stairs to the top floor with deliberate stealth. When she reached the top, she listened carefully before she ventured into the hallway.

The doors were all labelled with their resident's name, but it was far too dark for Kicker to read. She counted off until she reached the room she was certain belonged to Madelyn.

For a long moment Kicker stood silently and stared at the door, aware she was about to cross her own Rubicon. Then the thought of the woman asleep beyond that door drove everything else out of her mind. She drew a deep breath and tapped softly, hopeful that Madelyn was a light sleeper.

When no one answered, Kicker began to worry that she had the wrong door and she stepped back to count again. Just as she did, the door eased open, and Madelyn stood before her. Though dressed in a white nightgown, she had none of the look of a sleeper roused. Without a word, Madelyn reached out and drew Kicker into the room.

Once the door closed behind her, Kicker began to speak, only to feel Madelyn's finger over her lips.

"Hush one moment, dearest. Let me light a lamp first."

Kicker heeded the whispered words and held her tongue, though she longed to blurt out her news.

As the lamp flared, then steadied, Madelyn turned to look at her companion's face. Instantly a smile broke over her face. "You've decided."

"Aye."

"You'll come with me?"

“Now and always,” Kicker vowed. She stepped into the arms that opened to her. She buried her face against Madelyn’s neck and felt the promise of the slender arms that held her tightly.

“Wither thou goest... Oh, sweet woman, I swear to you, you’ll never regret this.”

Kicker pulled back and looked at Madelyn with twinkling eyes. “Well, I couldn’t let you go by yourself. Who knows what kin’ of trouble you’d get into without me about? They might not take kindly to Byron-quotin’ Suffragettes over there.” She sobered. “All I ask is that we go into town early enough that I might talk to Adam b’fore we leave. I cannot leave him without a word.”

“Whatever you need to do, we’ll make time for, dearest.” Madelyn grimaced. “When I returned this evening, there was a note under my door requiring my presence in the Headmaster’s office immediately after breakfast.” She gestured at the trunk sitting open at the foot of her bed. “I’ve already packed up most of my belongings.”

Kicker was aware that the morning’s confrontation would not be an easy one. “Are you sad then, to be leavin’ here?”

Madelyn cocked her head and smiled at Kicker. “Why would I be, when I’m taking the best part of Grindleshire Academy with me?” She shrugged a little. “Not that I’m at all thrilled to be terminated on Merrick’s account, mind you.”

Kicker allowed herself to indulge in a few seconds of revenge fantasies against the callow man who had ended their idyll. Then she was distracted as Madelyn tugged her over to the bed and drew Kicker down beside her.

Flustered, Kicker protested, “I think tis better I get back to the stables now. Twould be trouble if anyone caught me in here.”

“Shhh,” Madelyn soothed. “I won’t rush you into anything you’re not ready for, dearest, but rest here with me for a little while. When I went to bed this night, I didn’t know if I would ever get a chance to hold you again, and I could not rest for the fear of it. Just hold me a little while until I sleep, please?”

Helpless to resist, and lacking any real desire to do so, Kicker quickly unlaced her boots and set them aside. Madelyn drew closer to the wall to make room on the narrow bed, but when Kicker lay down, she found the lack of space well to her liking.

Resting their heads on the pillow, their faces were only inches apart. By an unspoken alchemy, the women surged together until limbs entangled and lips pressed in wild demands.

Kicker had no sexual experience at all and little inkling what she should do next. Her body shook with nervous excitement.

With obvious effort Madelyn broke their kiss and pulled her hands from beneath Kicker’s shirt. Breathing heavily, she dropped her head on Kicker’s shoulders. “I’m sorry, dearest. I really didn’t mean to rush you. I promise I’ll behave.” Madelyn smiled at her. “At least for now.”

Madelyn deposited one last, lingering kiss on eager lips, rolled over and snuggled back into Kicker’s body. Holding her companion securely, Kicker felt the moment when Madelyn finally drifted off, but no sleep came for her. Her body hummed with excitement. Although she was grateful that Madelyn was allowing her to set the pace of their physical explorations, Kicker was eager for the next opportunity to continue what they had begun that night.

When first light began to illuminate the clouds, Kicker slipped soundlessly out of bed. She left Madelyn with a soft kiss as she carried her boots out of the room.

Kicker encountered no one and hurriedly made her way out of the Academy proper and back to the stable just as dawn broke. With a quick splash of cold water to waken herself, she began her morning routine.

Kicker decided that she would keep things as normal as possible until she got word from Madelyn that it was time to leave. After feeding all the horses, she indulged in a long, careful grooming of her favourite. "I'll miss you somethin' fierce, Banner. Twill ne'er be 'nother like you for me. But min' you b'have yourself for Ol' Thomas. Don' be runnin' off on him or anythin'. I'm dependin' on you."

Kicker's heart lurched when she finally set the curry comb down. She wrapped her arms around the grey and hugged him as she whispered into his neck, "I'll ne'er forget you." Kicker brushed tears from her eyes, and resolutely began the walk to the kitchen for her last breakfast under Cook's affectionately bossy eye.

Sitting at the table with most of the household staff, Kicker wasn't a bit surprised to hear that talk was already of Miss Bristow refusing Merrick's proposal.

The general consensus was that the teacher must be mad, until Cook pronounced her opinion. "I b'lieve Miz Bristow knows bett'r'n any o' you lot the cut of young Mister Grindleshire's jib. I'm thinkin' she made a wise choice, an' I don' wanna hear no more 'bout it."

That was enough to stifle any further gossip.

Kicker watched as the housekeeper ordered everyone to their duties. With only the kitchen staff left, she made a point to thank Cook effusively for breakfast.

For a moment Kicker thought she had given herself away, as Cook eyed her shrewdly, but the large woman just laughed.

"Twas nothin' more than ye've eaten since ye first sat your scrawny self at my table. Now be off with ye. An' don' ye be

hidin' in the hay catchin' forty winks, either. Ye look like a blessed raccoon this mornin', lass."

Kicker grinned and headed for the back door. Before she reached it, she could have sworn she heard a gruff, "Ye're welcome, lass." By the time she got back to the stable, Old Thomas had already harnessed the matched chocolate-coloured mares, Daisy and Brownie, to the large carriage.

"More runs t'make t'day." Old Thomas raised an eyebrow as he got a good look at his stable hand. "Good Lord, girl, did ya sleep at all las' night?"

Kicker shook her head ruefully. "Not much." To deflect any further questions, she asked, "So when's the firs' run?" She hoped that Old Thomas would take it so that she could be present when Madelyn came to relay the results of her summoning.

"Got four teachers goin' out on the mornin' train." The stable master adjusted another buckle. "Word is twill be at leas' one on the late train, too." Old Thomas looked at Kicker expectantly. "Did ya 'ear about your frien', Miz Bristow?"

"Aye. Twas all the talk in the kitchen. They said she turned Mister Grindleshire down las' night."

"An' you can bet she'll be on the late train out. Himself won' be allowin' her to stay after that." Old Thomas finished his task and came over to lean on the rail beside Kicker. They watched the spring foals gambol around the paddock as their dams grazed peacefully. "Guess you'll be wantin' to take 'er into town, then?"

Kicker nodded. There was a long silence between them, a comfortable, familiar interlude between two naturally reticent people.

"You know Norman, the gardener's boy?"

"Aye, I do."

“Seems to me he could be a lot of help around here. He’s old enough, and has a fair hand with the horses.”

There was an even longer silence, but neither moved to break it until finally Old Thomas gave a deep sigh. “Tha’s the way of it then, is’t?”

“Aye.”

Old Thomas nodded, his face showing little emotion. “Thought it might be.” He pushed himself back and began to walk away. “‘S’pose Norman will do, then. Won’ have your touch, though.”

Kicker felt an overwhelming sadness that the decent old man, who had given her a chance most would not, would be burdened by her departure. For the rest of the morning, she moved about her chores in a haze of mingled excitement, exhaustion, and sorrow for the pleasant life that was swiftly slipping away.

Old Thomas had taken the morning run into town when Madelyn showed up at the stable. Her normal grace was absent and her shoulders were rigid as she approached the forge where Kicker worked. Kicker stopped hammering, and set the tongs aside as she waited.

Without preliminaries, Madelyn snapped, “Well, as expected, I’ve been summarily dismissed and ordered to be out of here by evening.” She drew in a deep breath and visibly struggled to calm herself.

“Tis sorry, I am. You did not deserve that.”

“Well, it could’ve been worse, though I would’ve happily dispensed with being called everything from Jezebel to a temptress... Mrs. Grindleshire’s contribution, by the way. I suppose I should be grateful that Mr. Grindleshire found gumption enough to defy his wife and give me references. Perhaps there is still some decency in the man that harridan has not eradicated.”

Kicker longed to take Madelyn in her arms and soothe the pain of the injustice. But, conscious of the broad light of day and her own dirty, sweat streaked body, she restrained herself.

“I’ve been instructed to be aboard the four o’clock train. The Grindleshires are taking Merrick to board the noon train and don’t wish to run any risk of encountering me.” Madelyn’s eyes snapped angrily. “Apparently I’ve become something of an Untouchable.”

“Not to me.”

At those soft words, the women’s eyes met and memories of what had begun the previous night flared between them.

“I’m counting on that, dearest.”

The quiet intensity of Madelyn’s voice made Kicker shiver. She nodded, barely able to speak over the thunder of her heart.

“As am I.”

“Walk me back?”

Kicker shook her head in regret. “Bes’ not, but I’ll pick up your trunk at mid-afternoon, and we’ll go into town then.”

Plans made, the two separated. When Old Thomas returned from town, Kicker told him of the next departure. “I can have Norman go with us an’ bring the carriage back.”

“No. I’ll drive the carriage. Thought you might wanna ride Banner one las’ time.”

Kicker was deeply touched by Old Thomas’ consideration. “Aye, tis a good idea. Thank you.”

Old Thomas nodded gruffly.

Kicker could’ve sworn there was a suspicious wetness in his eyes, but he quickly walked away.

Hours later, cleaned up and packed, Kicker looked around the small room that had been her home for seven years. One corner floorboard was still askew where she had pried open her hiding place and removed the frayed leather sack that held her savings. It wasn’t much—a little more than eleven pounds,

accumulated over years of frugal living—but Kicker would not cross the ocean penniless. She had not had time for much introspection, but she knew that, at least, was important to her.

Kicker paused for a quick farewell with each of her equine charges, then left the stable and found Madelyn and Old Thomas waiting in the carriage. Banner whinnied as she walked out into the sunlight. Unable to speak, Kicker simply tossed her bag into the carriage and mounted the gelding. As they passed through the Academy’s stone gates, she twisted for one last look at the lovely estate where she had found such contentment in her work and friendships.

Once on the road Madelyn suggested that Kicker ride ahead to see Adam and promised that they would meet at the station. Instantly, Kicker allowed Banner his head, and they flew down the road. When they reached the village, she slowed the horse and turned him down the road that led to her family home. Kicker knew at this hour Adam would be at their father’s smithy.

Her brothers and father looked up in surprise when Kicker cantered into the yard and slid off. “Can I talk to Adam, Da?”

Their father frowned. “Don’ be long. He’s work t’do.”

She nodded and Adam fell into step as they walked away from the forge, Banner trailing behind them. Without preliminaries, Kicker blurted her news. “I’m goin’ away.”

Adam blinked. “You are? Where? When?”

“T’day. To Canada.”

“What! What d’ya mean to Canada? You can’t just up and sail across the ocean all by yourself.”

“Why not? People do it e’ery day.”

“Not my little sister. What in God’s name put this daft notion in your head?”

“Tis not daft, Adam. An’ I’m not goin’ alone. I’m goin’ with someone special to make a new life. We cannot do that here, so we have to try someplace new.”

Adam’s shoulders sagged and Kicker saw reluctant acceptance enter his eyes. “So I was right. There is someone then.” A worried expression crossed his face. “You’re not in trouble, are you?”

“No. Well, at leas’, not really, but we do have to leave t’ be t’gether.”

They had automatically headed for the creekside that had hosted so many of their talks over the years. Adam was quiet for a long time before he asked pensively, “Is she worth it?”

Kicker nodded, not at all surprised that he knew. “You can meet her if you wan’ to come to the station with me.”

Adam considered that, chewing on his scraggly moustache as he was wont to do in times of great stress. “Are you telling Da?”

“No, nor Ma. I thought you could tell ’em once I’m off.”

That got a wry grin. “Coward.”

Kicker shrugged, not denying the charge.

“Well then, tis up to me to meet her and make sure she knows to take care of my little sister.”

They reached the creek, and watched as Banner waded in to get a drink. When the horse had his fill, they turned back towards the house, their conversation now deliberately avoiding what was to come. Kicker left Adam to make whatever excuse he could come up with while she went into the house.

Kicker found her mother in the kitchen, two small grandchildren hanging off her apron while she yelled at another for spilling flour.

“Ma?”

Mary turned in surprise. “Kicker? What’re ye doin’ ’ere mid-week?”

Kicker found her throat unexpectedly tight. “Had to run an erran’ so I thought I’d drop by. How’re you doin’, Ma?”

Her mother waved her hand around the chaotic kitchen. “Same’s always. Things ne’er change, ye know that.” Mary snatched at a pitcher that one of the children was dangerously close to knocking over. Kicker watched the familiar scene as her mother took her wooden spoon to the offender, who ran squalling from the room.

“Sometimes they do, Ma. Sometimes they do.” With those whispered words, Kicker hugged her startled mother and dashed out of the room, trying desperately to forestall her tears.

By the time she reached the forge, Kicker was under tenuous control. Adam had saddled his horse and was waiting for her. Mounting Banner, she called out to her father, “Be well, Da.”

He barely looked up. “Godspeed, Kicker. See ye soon.”

The tears threatened to overflow again as she turned Banner out of the yard. With Adam cantering beside her, Kicker twisted in the saddle for one last look as she tried to imprint home on her memory.

“You’ll carry it...and us, in your heart, little sister.” There was a suspicious break in Adam’s soft voice.

“Aye, I will.” At that moment, Kicker could not have said more to save her life.

When they arrived at the station, Madelyn and Old Thomas had just pulled in. The stable master volunteered to go get their tickets. Madelyn handed him the money and Kicker made introductions.

“Madelyn, this is my brother, Adam. Adam, this is Miss Madelyn Bristow.”

Adam eyed the teacher intently and she returned his gaze steadily. Finally he gave a quick nod. "You'll be good to her? Take care of her a'ways?"

"I will."

It was as solemn a promise as any heard in a church, and appeared to satisfy Adam. He offered his hand and Madelyn took it willingly. They shook firmly and sealed the vow.

"When are you two off, then?"

"We sail on the *SS Assiniboine*, a steamer with the Dominion Line. We leave Liverpool on the twenty-fourth and should dock in Montreal eight to ten days later, depending on weather during the crossing. From there we'll take a train across Canada to Manitoba. I've friends that are homesteading outside of Winnipeg, and we'll stay with them until we get our feet under us."

Adam nodded gravely. "Make sure she don' ferget us."

"She won't," Madelyn replied with equal solemnity. "I'll ensure that she writes at least once a month."

Kicker rolled her eyes, feeling like an errant schoolgirl.

Old Thomas was returning from the wicket when Adam drew her aside and bestowed his blessing. "She seems like a good 'un, but you r'member you kin always come home if you want. No shame in admittin' when you made a mistake."

Adam looked half hopeful as he admonished her, and Kicker smiled at him.

"P'rhaps you and Anne could join us. Lots of room to raise a growin' family out there. You could have lan' of your own and a bunch of men workin' for you, 'stead of slavin' for Da for the nex' twen'y years."

Kicker was surprised to see an interested gleam in his eyes, but Adam just pulled her into his arms and issued a fierce order. "You write an' let us know where you are, soon's you get there."

Kicker buried her face in Adam's stained tunic and breathed deeply of the sweat and forge smoke she had associated with him for as long as she could remember. Tears ran freely and she made no effort to stop them as she hugged her brother with all her strength. Kicker's muttered words were almost inaudible against his chest.

"Love you."

"Love you right back, little sister. You better take care of yourself, or I'm going to kick your arse all the way to—"

"Canada?" Kicker pulled back as a grin broke through the tears.

Adam cuffed her lightly and released her. "An' don' think I won'." He kissed her on the forehead and turned away. Without a backwards glance, he mounted his horse and trotted down the dusty street towards home.

Kicker stared after him until he rounded the corner and disappeared from her view. Madelyn and Old Thomas, engaged in quiet conversation, politely faced away from the teary leave-taking.

Kicker mopped her face on her sleeve and walked over to them.

Banner was tied to the back of the carriage, and Madelyn's trunk, as well as Kicker's small bag, sat on the platform.

Old Thomas handed Kicker a thin leather purse. "Your final wages, lass. Thought ya might have need of 'em."

Kicker hoped her eyes conveyed all she felt. "Thank you...for everythin'."

Old Thomas shrugged. With a nod that took in both of the women, he said hoarsely, "Best o' luck, ta both of ye." Pulling himself laboriously up into the carriage, he tipped his cap and gave a sly grin. "Nex' time I'm hirin' me one o' them eunuchs."

With a deep guffaw Old Thomas departed the station. The two women gaped after him in shock, then broke into laughter, too.

Chapter 3

What have I done? The thought reverberated through her mind as Madelyn watched the quiet figure opposite her on the padded train seat. Kicker had said little since leaving the station and the only life she had ever known. Instead she watched the pastoral countryside as they rolled steadily toward an uncertain future.

The speed with which events unfolded had left Madelyn little time to truly contemplate the measure of what she asked of Kicker. As she had so often done in her life, Madelyn acted on instinct and booked both of them passage to Canada before she even declared her feelings.

It had seemed so right. The instant Madelyn felt Kicker respond to her first kiss, everything fell into place as never before. And when she lit the lamp and saw the look on her midnight visitor's face, Madelyn was flooded with a joy so powerful that she could scarcely stand. Even up to the moment when she watched Kicker and Adam say goodbye, Madelyn was convinced of the rightness of her actions. Then they boarded the train.

Kicker was slightly ahead of Madelyn. When she began to mount the steps to the car, the conductor moved to block her, glowering at her presumption for entering the first class carriage. Madelyn quickly laid a hand on her companion's back and fixed the man with a haughty stare. She knew he instantly received the message, as he stepped back and touched his cap politely, though his scowl remained in place.

It happened so fast that Madelyn didn't know if Kicker even noticed the exchange, but the implications were not lost

on her. Kicker was a fish out of water in her world, and Madelyn knew she was going to have to battle constantly to ensure her acceptance.

She was not sure she was up to the task.

Madelyn had been self-sufficient for so long that she had forgotten—if she had ever known—what it was to be responsible for another’s feelings and welfare. Now she ached at the thought that someone’s automatic imposition of social conventions might hurt Kicker.

I’ve taken her from a life where her oddities were appreciated. Dear God, let our new life offer her the same kind of acceptance.

Madelyn clung to the hope that Canada would offer a haven from the class-ridden society into which she and Kicker had been born. Despite her reservations, Madelyn allowed herself to dream of a place where the two women could truly make a home together, until she was wrenched from her thoughts by a quiet voice.

“What troubles you, Madelyn?”

Though her first name still sounded foreign on Kicker’s tongue, Madelyn reveled in the sound of it. She shook her head, intending to brush aside her companion’s concerns. But Kicker fixed her with eyes that had peered effortlessly into her soul from the first moment they met. *She is an adult. She’s freely chosen to walk this difficult path with me. I owe her the respect of being forthright.*

“The conductor...” Madelyn said, and hesitated, unsure of how to explain her concern.

“Aye, he’d’a sent me to the back of the train did you not make it clear I b’longed with you.”

“I should’ve known naught would get by you, dearest.” Madelyn shook her head in chagrin.

“Why does’t concern you so?” Kicker’s voice was genuinely curious.

Madelyn wondered for a moment how her partner saw herself—if Kicker recognized how different she was from other women.

Madelyn looked around and noted gratefully that there were only a handful of people in their car. Their nearest neighbour was a portly gentleman who snored softly three seats away. Unwilling to take a chance, however, she leaned forward and spoke softly. “We must be careful, dearest. We must tread lightly until we slip away. Once we are established in our own home in Canada, we’ll be able to relax somewhat...to be more ourselves.”

Kicker shrugged. “Tis not my way to cause a commotion or get in trouble.”

“I know, dearest, but sometimes—many times, I’m afraid—trouble seeks out those innocently going about their business.” Madelyn drew in a deep breath. She did not want to disparage Kicker in any way, but she knew that they had to deal with the potential difficulties that would arise from Kicker’s unorthodox dress and manner. “People often react badly to...unconventional ways.”

Kicker nodded soberly and tweaked the worn fabric of her trousers between finger and thumb. “An’ not many women wear these.”

“Very few,” Madelyn agreed, desperately hoping Kicker would not take offence. She loved every aspect of the unique woman with whom she had fallen so in love. In a perfect world, everyone would see Kicker as she did, but it was not a perfect world. Madelyn was determined that Kicker not lose the essence of what made her who she was, societal norms or not. However, she also knew that if Kicker was not willing to

make some compromises, it would make both of their lives much more difficult, and potentially even dangerous.

“I don’ own a dress, wouldna wear one if I did.” Kicker stubbornly banged the heel of her boot against the floor for emphasis. “Cannot do my work like that.”

“I know, dearest, but our journey might be smoother if you let me furnish you with one or two dresses once we reach the city.” Madelyn held up a soothing hand as a rebellious look clouded Kicker’s face. “Not for everyday use, but just for when you need to fit in.” She winced at her own words, but did not retract them.

Kicker was clearly unhappy with the idea and Madelyn kept silent, letting her mull it over.

“I could pass as a boy. Happened all the time at the Academy.”

Madelyn nodded. “I thought of that too, but then we wouldn’t be able to share lodgings in London, or on the ship.” Dropping her voice even lower, Madelyn delivered the coup de grace with a sensuous smile. “And I do so want us to share a room.”

It was not difficult to see how her words affected Kicker. Madelyn let her eyes linger on the front of Kicker’s thin muslin shirt and felt an answering response that made her ache.

Flushed, Kicker nodded and tucked trembling hands under her thighs. “Only when tis necess’ry, though.”

“Agreed.” Madelyn decided it might be prudent to outline how they would define “necessary.” “It would be best to wear such garb when we stay at my parents’ house, and when we board and disembark from our ship.”

Kicker groaned softly, but did not protest. Changing an obviously unpleasant subject, she asked, “What are our plans?”

Relieved that they had cleared the first major hurdle with scarcely a stumble, Madelyn leaned back and relaxed. “When

we reach London, our first stop is going to be at a shop run by a friend of mine. We'll be able to get suitable clothing for you there. Then we'll stay with my parents for the next ten days or so, making preparations for the trip. We'll need to decide what we should take with us and what can be left behind, for it may be a long time before we are back again, if ever."

The "if ever" hung in the air between them, and Madelyn did not miss the way Kicker flinched.

"I also wish to take you to the Canada High Commission later this week. They put on exhibitions and receptions for prospective immigrants. I thought you would enjoy seeing something of the land to which we are moving."

She breathed a small sigh of relief at Kicker's nod. Madelyn knew that the reality of Kicker's parting with Adam had not completely sunk in. However, she was determined to keep Kicker focused on the adventure that lay ahead, rather than on what she had left behind.

"How're you gonna explain me to your ma and da?"

There was a challenging note in Kicker's voice, and Madelyn grimaced inwardly.

"I've already discussed with them my plans to emigrate. I'll simply say that your father, who works at the Academy, asked that you be allowed to accompany me as you travel to meet your husband in Canada."

Kicker looked impressed by her inventiveness, and Madelyn felt a pang of guilt at her ability to prevaricate. It was a useful skill, one that had served her well as she lived her unconventional life, but it was not something of which she was proud.

"They don' min' you goin' all that way alone?"

"I think they will be glad that I've someone with me." Madelyn knew she had ducked the essence of the question.

Not surprisingly, Kicker did not allow the dodge. “But what do they think of you leavin’ England? Tis not many women would do so without a husband by their side.”

“When I informed them, I said I was going because I’d heard that the ratio of men to women in the Northwest Territories was three to one. My father said he didn’t know why I hadn’t accepted a proposal from a proper Englishman, but that if I wanted a cowboy, so be it. He thinks it well past time that I give up teaching and settle down. He told me rather sternly that he would expect a letter from me within the year saying that I’d found a suitable spouse.”

There was an audible snort from Kicker. “And your ma? Does she approve of your plans?”

Madelyn could not help a rueful smile as she thought of her mother’s incredulous look upon hearing her announcement. “Perhaps we should just say that, while Mother has her reservations, she’s kept her own counsel.”

“Huh.” Kicker changed the topic. “Tell me about this friend we’re to stay with in Canada.”

“Adelaide and I have known each other since we were children though she is somewhat older than me. She was the one who originally got me involved with the Suffragette movement. She has very pronounced opinions on women’s emancipation, and she challenged many of my ingrained ideas. I owe her a great deal, and I’m very much looking forward to seeing her again.”

Startled to see a troubled look cross Kicker’s face, Madelyn stopped and leaned forward. “What is it, dearest? What’s the matter?”

Kicker fidgeted. “Was she... I mean, were you and her... How close are you?”

Amused, Madelyn patted Kicker’s knee. “Close, but not in the way that you mean. Adelaide is very happily married, and

has been for a good decade and longer.” She leaned back again, oddly flattered at the unexpected indication of jealousy. But when Kicker refused to meet her eyes and stared out the window with a faraway gaze, Madelyn became concerned.

“Kicker.” Her companion ignored her, but Madelyn persisted. “Kicker, please look at me.”

Reluctantly, dark eyes swiveled to meet hers. Madelyn held Kicker’s gaze intently. She needed her companion to hear her next words with her heart. “Dearest, I will not deny that there have been others with whom I was involved over the years, but they were transitory affairs. They meant little to me then, for I was young and none acquired my heart, only my body. They mean nothing at all to me now. You, my love, you mean everything to me. If you believe nothing else, please believe that.”

It seemed like forever before Kicker ducked her head in acknowledgement and gave her a sweet half-smile. “I do. Tis jus’ I cannot believe you wan’ to spen’ your life with me, when you could have anyone you wanted.”

The whispered words were almost lost in the rhythmic sound of the wheels clacking over rails, but Madelyn heard them loud and clear. She ached at the insecurity in Kicker’s voice. Madelyn longed to reassure Kicker not only of the depth and resiliency of her love, but that their path would be smooth and unimpeded. She was a realist, though, and knew better than to make false promises.

Madelyn slid into the seat next to Kicker, took her hand, and cupped it as if it were the most delicate crystal. “I wish I could promise you endless days of happiness and boundless nights of pleasure. What I can promise you are these things: my undying love, my absolute devotion, and my commitment to never break my word to Adam. I will cherish you the rest of

my days. I may not be able to make that vow in a church, but I make it with unequivocal sincerity.”

The tanned hand curled around the pale fingers which cradled it, and squeezed firmly. They sat for a long moment in silent communion until the conductor entered the car at the far end of the aisle.

Their fingers loosened and drew apart as Kicker whispered, “About those boundless nights of pleasure...”

Madelyn stifled a shocked laugh and slid across to her own seat. She stared into eyes that sparkled back at her unrepentantly. She shivered and counted the hours until they would be safely behind closed doors, when she could begin to educate Kicker as to exactly what pleasures awaited them.

~ * * * ~

When they stepped off the train onto a crowded platform and Kicker set foot for the first time in London, she turned to Madelyn, eyes wide with awe. “I always heard, but I ne’er seen the like of it.”

Madelyn smiled. She had been attuned to Kicker’s amazement as they left the countryside behind and began moving through larger and larger towns, culminating in their arrival in London. She had worried that Kicker would be put off by the dirty, often blighted areas that they traversed. However, it seemed as though Kicker was far too curious about everything to draw any negative comparisons with the tranquility of her home village.

“I would like to show you some of the city before we leave, but for now let’s concentrate on finding transportation to depart from this madhouse.”

Before Madelyn could raise her hand to signal a waiting hansom cab, Kicker seized her forearm in excitement. “D’you think we might get to see the Queen, then?”

“I rather doubt it, dearest.” Madelyn gently unlocked the powerful fingers from around her arm. “She’s quite elderly now and rarely makes public appearances.” Kicker frowned in disappointment. “But we’ll go and see the Queen’s Guard, shall we? I think you’ll enjoy the spectacle; it is quite the occasion.”

Suddenly Kicker slammed her boot down on the top of Madelyn’s trunk and glared. Two grimy urchins had sidled up next to the chest and Kicker’s bag of belongings while the women talked, their attention distracted.

One of the boys bolted, but the more brazen of the two sneered as he backed away. “‘Ere, mister, don’ be lookin’ so queerly. We ain’t done nuffin.” Then the boy paused with a puzzled look on his face as he stared at Kicker. When she jerked her foot down from the chest, he decided not to hang around and took off running.

Madelyn shook her head and signaled the cabbie, who moved up to take the trunk as the two women climbed into the carriage.

“Mrs. Harrington’s at 12 Wesley Lane, please, driver.”

Though it was dusk, the streets surrounding the station were still tumultuous with people, carriages, and horses. Madelyn watched Kicker crane her neck to take in every detail of their surroundings. She was struck by how truly innocent her companion was.

When Madelyn glanced out the window, all she saw was the dirty, overcrowded, often crime ridden streets she was all too ready to leave behind forever. But Kicker’s wonder reminded Madelyn of a long ago time when she, too, had thought the city magical.

Shortly they passed into quieter, more prosperous streets, where neat, attractive shops lined wide cobblestoned lanes. The cabbie pulled to a halt in front of a small, yellow sandstone house with a boldly lettered sign that read: *Mrs. Harrington's Fine Clothing for Ladies*.

While Kicker and the cabbie hauled the trunk up the short flight of stairs, Madelyn rang the bell that hung prominently to the right of the door. It took two more vigorous pulls of the chain before the door opened.

"I'm sorry, we're clo... Well, as I live and breathe, if it isn't Maddie Bristow!" The short, plump, white haired woman who stood in the doorway beamed and clasped her arms around the visitor.

Madelyn laughed with pleasure at seeing her old friend and returned the hug enthusiastically. When the woman began to explode with questions, Madelyn held up a restraining hand. "All in good time, Lil. First, before I send the cabbie on his way, I need to know if you've room for a couple of weary travelers." Madelyn indicated Kicker who stood quietly two stairs below Madelyn, bag over one shoulder.

The cabbie, with hands thrust in his jacket, awaited his fare.

"Of course, Maddie. You know I've always got room for you and any friend of yours. Pay the poor man and get in here."

Madelyn did so, and reached to take one end of the trunk.

Kicker shook her head and lifted it easily by herself as she followed Madelyn across the threshold.

Lil led the two through the front shop area, where several mannequins displayed the latest London fashions. Madelyn smiled as they passed the large rear room and fitting area, which featured a huge cutting table, two sewing machines, and reams of material stacked in every available space. When she'd lived in London, Madelyn had spent many pleasant hours in that room helping Lil and her business partner, Vivian, do

finishing needlework on ladies' garments. When they reached the end of the hall, they came to a flight of stairs which led to the living quarters.

"Please, dearest, let me help," Madelyn pleaded as they came to the bottom of the stairs. "You'll hurt yourself."

Kicker shook her head and determinedly held on to the trunk. "Tis naught. A few of your fancies ain't be weighin' nothin'."

Madelyn caught the shrewd look Lil cast her way, but the older woman held her tongue as she led them up the flight of steps and along the narrow upstairs hall to a small room that overlooked the street.

"Here you be. Maddie, you know where everything is, so I'll let you get settled in while I go see what I can find in the kitchen. I imagine you're hungry."

As Kicker set the trunk at the foot of the bed, Madelyn took her old friend's hands. "I'm so very grateful, Lil. We'll be out of your way shortly, but I knew I could depend on you for succour."

Lil gave her another quick hug. "Always, girl, you know that." She pulled back and glanced to where Kicker peered out the window. "I believe you have more than a few things to tell me."

Madelyn nodded, and in an equally soft voice, though she knew that it would not escape her lover's notice, she promised, "Later."

The older woman closed the door gently behind her and Madelyn turned to see Kicker regarding her gravely.

"She din't ask my name."

"No. I'm sorry. I'll introduce you when we go downstairs."

"I'm thinkin' tis not the firs' time you've brought a frien' here."

Madelyn flushed, but there was no accusation in the calm voice or censure in the dark eyes. She chose her words carefully. “There have been times that I’ve found it expedient to spend a night here rather than at my own home, and yes, Lil has always been a very discreet hostess.”

Madelyn crossed the room to stand in front of Kicker. “Dearest, I told you that my past is not unblemished. I thought it would be easiest to delay our arrival at my parents’ home until we expanded on your wardrobe somewhat. But if it makes you uncomfortable to be here, we can go there tonight.”

Kicker shook her head and reached for Madelyn.

Madelyn nestled into the wiry body and greedily absorbed the comfort freely offered.

“Tis no matter that you’re not chaste, love.” The soft words burred over Madelyn’s shoulder. “I’ve no right to be down on what went before, and I don’t mean to be.” Kicker chuckled. “B’sides, seems to me one of us should know what we’re doin’, right?”

Madelyn sighed as she felt soft lips nibble at her neck. She wished fervently that they could skip supper and not leave the room until the morning. Though Madelyn had done just that with previous conquests, she refused to treat Kicker so cavalierly. She wanted to introduce Kicker to her old friend, and make it clear that this was no flight of fancy—that she had finally found the one who completed her. “As much as I would like to continue this... Oh!”

Kicker’s hand cupped Madelyn’s breast and her thumb gently rubbed a hardening nipple.

Madelyn swallowed hard against her body’s response, laid her hand over the adventurous fingers and stilled their movement. “Dearest, if you don’t stop, we’ll never make it out of this room.”

Kicker's slow, mischievous smile indicated that was exactly what she had in mind, but she obediently withdrew her hand and backed away.

Madelyn almost reached to draw her back, but she managed to restrain the impulse. "We should go down."

"Aye."

But neither woman moved, as they stood and stared at each other, their bodies shivering in erotic anticipation. In the end, it was only the realization that they stood in front of an open window that allowed Madelyn to break the profoundly sensual connection which pulsed between them.

"Please..." It was a whispered plea, and much to her amazement, Kicker responded by striding past her to the door. Wordlessly, she held it open as Madelyn forced herself to walk by without touching.

As Madelyn descended the stairs, she was acutely aware of Kicker close behind her. It had been over two years since she last visited Lil with a woman in tow, but she couldn't attribute the stark intensity of what she felt to the extended period of abstinence. The weakness in her legs, the uncontrollable trembling of her hands, and the powerful desire that kept her nerves thrumming unbearably were all due to Kicker.

It was obvious from Lil's amused smile when they entered the kitchen that their state did not go unnoticed, but blessedly the older woman did not tease them. She merely indicated that they should take a seat at the table, which was laid with an assortment of cold dishes.

Once settled, Madelyn looked pointedly at her old friend. "Lil, I would like you to meet someone very dear to me. This is Kicker Stuart. Kicker, Mrs. Harrington is one of my oldest and dearest friends, and you may trust her as you would me."

Lil smiled at Madelyn's statement, then at Kicker who regarded her with interest. "It's very nice to meet you, Kicker. You are most welcome in my home."

"Thank you, Missus."

"Ah, but if we are to be friends, Kicker, you must call me Lil."

"Lil, then. If you don't mind, can I ask how you know Madelyn?"

Lil gestured for the two of them to start their supper, and settled back. "Many, many years ago I was Maddie's nanny. Outside of the midwife that brought her into this world, I was the first one to hold her. I diapered her, wiped her nose, and bandaged more than one scrape along the way."

"Of the visible and not so visible sort," Madelyn added, regarding Lil affectionately.

Lil's eyes were suspiciously bright as she continued. "And when the last of the Bristow children outgrew me, Mrs. Bristow very kindly set me up in my own shop. I've been here ever since."

"I'll never truly outgrow you, Lil. Many's the time I don't know what I would've done without you."

"Ah well, there are still some things that you can tell your old nanny that are best not told your mother," Lil acknowledged with a smile. "But no getting maudlin now, Maddie girl. I suspect you've a purpose here tonight, and you might as well be telling me."

Madelyn turned serious and leaned forward. "I'm leaving England. Kicker and I are going to Canada to make a new life together."

Lil's eyes widened in shock. "Canada? But, so far, Maddie? Must you go so far away from...all that you've ever known?"

Madelyn sighed and looked across the table at Kicker. Their eyes held for a timeless moment. “I love Kicker. I need to leave here so we can find a place where we may fit in.”

Troubled, Lil shook her head slowly. “Are you sure that place is in Canada? Do you not think you can find such a place here?”

“Under my father’s omnipresent eye? You know I cannot—not in London, and probably nowhere in England or even on the Continent. But even Timothy Bristow’s reach does not cross the ocean. It’s a vast land we’re going to, Lil. We can vanish there.”

“Will I never again hear from you?”

Lil’s voice was soft and sorrowful. Madelyn took the woman’s hand and absently noted the profusion of wrinkles and dark spots that denoted the passage of time. She stroked it gently as she tried to impart reassurance. “You shall, I promise. I swear I’ll write all the time. I’ll tell you everything, and you will live the adventure along with us.”

“But I’ll never again open my door and see your wayward self standing there ready to share a story and a laugh. Never again to hear the cock crow because we’ve spent the whole night talking without the knowing of it.” Tears began to seep over the woman’s lined, and suddenly aged, face.

Madelyn bowed her head and simply kissed the hand she held as her own tears ran freely. All three women were silent as Lil absorbed the news, already grieving for the child she’d loved as her own, and the woman who had become a dear friend.

Finally Lil pulled her hand out of Madelyn’s grasp and yanked a large white handkerchief out of her apron pocket. Wiping her eyes and blowing her nose, she sat up determinedly. “Well then, what can I do to help smooth your journey?”

It was Madelyn's turn to wipe away her tears, and in a shaky voice she laid out their plan. "And I thought that it would be easier all around if Kicker had some more conventional clothing—perhaps two day dresses and one for evenings?"

Lil looked at Kicker closely and gestured for her to stand. Kicker bolted a bite of cold beef and obediently stood, allowing the seamstress' professional eye to size up her body.

When Lil was satisfied, she motioned Kicker back to her seat. "There are a few things in the donation box that might fit her, and I can whip up a bit of finery in a day. I'll take her measurements tonight and get to work on the clothing first thing in the morning. I have just the rose coloured bit that will go well with her dark hair. There may even be a proper pair of shoes in the box, if they'll fit her. For certain she can't be wearing those old boots with my creations."

Lil hustled off to her sewing room as Madelyn chuckled at Kicker's look of consternation. "Calm yourself, dearest. It will be painless, I promise. Now finish up, so Lil can measure you."

Kicker looked doubtful, but dutifully finished her tea without protest. "What did she mean 'donation box'?"

"Quite often when ladies have her make them new dresses, they'll donate their older, unwanted things. Lil collects them and takes them to the Women's Benevolence Union. The people there help women down on their luck. They provide shelter, clothing, and often education to enable them to escape their fates. They also regularly send her a couple of girls as apprentices, and she trains them until they're ready to go out on their own. Quite a number of young women literally owe their existence to Lil's kindness."

Kicker nodded at the explanation and looked up warily as Lil bustled back into the room. She stood silently and endured the seamstress' fussing while Lil took measurements and noted

down figures until she was satisfied. Kicker looked pleadingly at Madelyn and the teacher smiled.

“Go ahead, dearest. You’ll find the water closet down the hall on the right, and I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

Kicker practically ran out of the room, and Lil shook her head. “Quite the skittish young colt, isn’t she?” Pulling up a chair, she fixed a firm gaze on her former charge. “Right then, we’ve a few minutes to ourselves, so spill it.”

Madelyn did not make any pretence that she didn’t know what her friend meant. “I love her, like I’ve never in my life loved anyone else. You know as well as I do that things are exceedingly difficult for people such as us. My father has never forgotten or forgiven me for what happened in ’91. I need to get Kicker far enough away that we at least stand a chance of living our lives peacefully together.”

Lil scowled. “That Charity was tribulation right from the start. I never did understand what you were thinking, girl.”

Madelyn blushed and shook her head. “I wasn’t thinking; I was only feeling.” Her tone became fierce. “Charity may have been tribulation to some, but she didn’t deserve what my father did to her. I’m not taking any chance of Kicker suffering his wrath if he were to discover the truth about us.”

“Are you sure you want to go over to your parents’ place then, little one?” The very fact that Lil used the old endearment indicated the depth of her concern. “You know you’re welcome to stay here as long as you need to.”

“God, what will I do without you?” Madelyn gazed at her affectionately. “I wish I could take you up on that, but there are things I need from the house. I’d like to see you again before we leave, but I also want to spend some time with Mother before we go and see my uncle, siblings, nieces and nephews.”

“Mmm, well, I can understand that. And I know your mother will be pleased to have you home.”

Neither woman mentioned Madelyn's father, but his shadow pervaded their thoughts.

"You might want to talk to your mother about taking some of Roderick's clothes with you. I suspect that girl of yours will kick off her dresses as soon as she can, and Roddy was about Kicker's size when he passed on. I know your mother has never given his things away, but if you can come up with a good reason, I expect she might be ready to part with them at last."

Madelyn sighed at the mention of her brother who died in the worldwide influenza epidemic of '89. He was only fifteen, and the baby of the seven siblings. Their grief-stricken mother had withdrawn completely from her family, and at sixteen, Madelyn found herself virtually an orphan.

It was only in the most recent years that Elizabeth Bristow managed to regain the strength and force of will that was once so characteristic. Sadly, in the interim she and Madelyn had grown apart, despite their love for each other.

Madelyn's three sisters and two brothers had all married and produced children, which enabled Elizabeth to reconnect with them as a doting grandmother. But her youngest daughter's single-minded preference for teaching over marriage was a constant source of bewilderment for the Bristow matriarch.

"Please be careful in your father's house, Maddie. You can paint a pigeon like a peacock, but it's still a pigeon. You can dress Kicker up proper, but can you hide what's in her eyes when she looks at you? If your father gets the slightest inkling about the two of you..." Lil shuddered.

Madelyn considered Lil's caution for long moments. She could not deny that she was nervous about their stay, however short, under her father's roof, but she felt she had to take the risk if they were to sail with everything they needed.

Finally Madelyn met the worried eyes that regarded her steadily. “Perhaps we’ll take you up on your invitation to stay a few more days while I coach Kicker as to what to expect. I do have a story ready to explain her presence, but you’re right—she lacks the experience you and I have at concealing what must be kept secret.”

Madelyn knew by the relief on Lil’s face that she had made the right decision, but again she felt the uneasiness of responsibility. With the notable exception of Charity, Madelyn had kept the two parts of her life strictly separate, and for years it worked well. She briefly considered leaving Kicker at Lil’s while she visited her parents, but she quickly rejected that. Madelyn did not want Kicker to feel abandoned or neglected. She would have to rely on her lover’s intuition and innate intelligence to keep them both safe while in the lion’s den.

“It will work out,” Madelyn muttered, mostly to herself. “It has to.”

Warm hands covered hers comfortingly, and the two women sat quietly in shared awareness of the difficult road that lay ahead.

With a deep sigh, Lil drew her hands away. “Your girl will wonder what’s become of you; I expect she’s waiting up.” Lil eyed Madelyn shrewdly. “My apprentices will be here early in the morning, so be careful. They’re good girls for the most part, but I don’t wish to give them cause to chatter any more than they already do.”

With a little grin, Lil stood and gave an ostentatious yawn. “As for me, I believe I will retire early. You know I sleep like a log the moment I lay my old head down. Good night, Maddie. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Madelyn could have sworn that her friend winked as she turned to leave, and she could not help the blush that warmed her face. Lil had never made any pointed references to

Madelyn's occasional overnight guest through the years. Nor had Madelyn ever commented on why Lil and Mrs. Vivian Johnston, her late business partner and lifelong friend, had shared the same bedroom since Lil left the Bristow's employ after Roderick died. The longstanding current of understanding between them made such things superfluous.

Now, however, her friend's subtle insinuation set the butterflies dancing in her belly again, and Madelyn stood on unsteady legs to tidy up the kitchen. She took the lamp with her as she made her way down the darkened but familiar hallway. She stopped briefly to make her ablutions, then paused at the foot of the stairs and stared beyond the soft glow of the lamp.

Kicker was waiting for her...in their bed.

As never before, Madelyn was stunned by the depth of the commitment that Kicker had made, and the realization shook her, slowing her steps. She had never been with an innocent, and she feared that she would frighten or hurt Kicker.

Then comprehension of Kicker's courage and willingness to face the unknown flooded over Madelyn, and she chastised herself for her doubts.

Madelyn lifted her skirts and took one step and then another; her speed became quicker with each one. By the time she reached the landing, she was almost running. With a deep breath, Madelyn forced herself to slow her pace as she hurried down the hall to the small end room.

When Madelyn slipped quietly into the room, she was momentarily taken aback to see Kicker in a chair by the window, barefoot but still clothed as she watched the street below. Before she could wonder if her lover had changed her mind, Kicker stood, drew the curtains, and turned to greet Madelyn with a dazzling smile.

There was no hint of nervousness in the soft voice, and Kicker's eyes sparkled with anticipation. "I bin waitin' for you."

Madelyn gave a muted sigh of relief, set the lamp on a side table and advanced to meet Kicker. For a long moment they simply held each other and let their bodies say what words expressed so inadequately.

Finally, aware that this night it would be up to her to lead, Madelyn laid her fingers on the top button of Kicker's shirt. Not wanting to presume, she asked, "May I?"

In answer, Kicker moved her own hands to the long row of tiny pearl buttons that fastened the back of Madelyn's dress and began to work them open. Smiling, Madelyn made short work of the coarse shirt, and ran her hands lightly over Kicker's belly to the trouser buttons.

"Tisn't fair, you know," Kicker murmured, only halfway through her task. "You'll have me naked before I kin get these bless'd fastenings undone."

Madelyn only laughed as she undid the last button and watched the trousers slip down over her lover's narrow hips. Kicker wore no underwear, and Madelyn could not resist trailing her fingers lightly through the dark triangle revealed to her avid gaze.

Kicker flinched. "Bless'd Jesus, woman. If you don' want me to rip these right off, you'll stay your wanderin' fingers."

Delighted by the effect she had on her lover, Madelyn nonetheless pulled her hands away and rested them virtuously on Kicker's lean waist as she waited.

When fumbling fingers undid the last of the buttons, Madelyn stepped back to allow Kicker to draw the dress down over her shoulders. She almost laughed aloud at the look of dismay on Kicker's face as she faced the laced sateen corset underneath.

Only slightly daunted, Kicker tugged on the top lace and began loosening the stays. “I hope you’re not expectin’ me to wear one of these contraptions. Tis worse than ol’ Cherry’s rig.”

Madelyn could not help a chuckle at the comparison, but when Kicker finally worked her way down to the lace edged chemise and long drawers, she stopped laughing. And when Kicker knelt to unbutton the stylish French kid boots, Madelyn heard her heartbeat thunder in her ears. As Kicker unclipped garters and rolled stockings down her legs, the sensuality of the moment became almost unbearable.

Kicker scarcely had time to rise to her feet before Madelyn frantically pushed off the unbuttoned shirt and pressed against her. All thoughts of taking it slow and not rushing her inexperienced lover fled in the overwhelmingly erotic sensation of flesh against flesh.

In her sensual haze, Madelyn heard a small growl from deep in Kicker’s throat and knew that she felt the same need. Later she was never sure how they made it to the bed, or who started what, or where one body began and the other left off. But Madelyn never forgot the primal ecstasy of their first touch, of initiating her lover to unfamiliar joys, or of being the first to coax the unrestrained sounds of rapture from Kicker’s lips.

At length Madelyn rested her sweat soaked form on Kicker’s exhausted body, and listened with enchantment to her soft, deliriously indecipherable sounds of pleasure. She knew that no matter what awaited them, she would cherish the memory of this night and pray for a thousand more.

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