

Chapter One

Shadwell, London,
November 1880

Lily had been too busy wrestling with the mangle in the outhouse at the rear of the old dockmaster's house to pay much attention to the weather, but pausing for a moment to brush a lock of damp hair from her forehead she sniffed and wrinkled her nose. She could smell it and taste it even before she stuck her head out of the door and saw the telltale strands of pea-green fog creeping over the brick wall into the back yard. It curled like a sneak-thief's fingers around the men's shirts and underwear as if it were about to pluck them from the washing line.

She sighed and arched her aching back. She hated Mondays. If she ruled the country she would make it illegal for women to spend the whole day slaving over a copper filled with boiling water and strong-smelling lye soap. She would put a stop to the drudgery of mangling, rinsing and then mangling again before the clean garments could be hung out to dry.

She had been slaving away since dawn, and with the sudden change in the weather came the knowledge that the washing would not dry in time to be ironed that evening. Her brothers would have to wear soiled shirts beneath their firemen's uniforms for another day at

least, and they would not be happy about that. Then there was Nell, her eldest sister who taught at the Ragged School in George Street; she would grumble bitterly if she did not have a clean white collar and cuffs to keep her grey poplin blouse looking spick and span until Friday. As for Molly, Lily's senior by one year – well, Molly was a trial at the best of times. As Grandpa Larkin said, Molly would try the patience of a saint; she was unpredictable as the weather. She was like the little girl with the curl in the middle of her forehead: when she was good she was very, very good and when she was bad she was horrid. Well, Lily thought, grinning, Molly was not that bad and she certainly wasn't horrid, but she had inherited the Delamare temperament from their artistic mother. Molly worked as an apprentice silk handkerchief dyer for old man Cobham in Sun Tavern Place, and she invariably arrived home with her clothes splattered in rainbow hues, most of which were impossible to remove.

Lily cranked the handle a little faster, feeding the wet garment through the giant rollers with care. She had learned from bitter experience that getting her fingers caught between them was something to be avoided at all costs. Why, she wondered, was life so unfair? Having been born the youngest of six she was expected to stay at home all day and help to keep house while her elder siblings went out to work. Her time was not her own. Of course they had Agnes to do the cooking, but she was more like part of the family than a servant and she was getting on in years. Her fingers were gnarled with rheumatism and her legs were

corded with varicose veins, which she was pleased to demonstrate whenever anyone asked her to do anything that she considered to be above and beyond the call of duty. This included washing, ironing, scrubbing floors and beating what was left of their threadbare carpets on the washing line. Changing the sheets and bedmaking also came into this category, although each of the Larkin children had been brought up to do this for themselves. It had been many years since the family could afford a domestic to do the mundane chores, and these had gradually been heaped upon Lily's slender shoulders.

If only Ma had stayed to raise the family she had borne so easily and then carelessly abandoned, but she had run off with an artist, or so Lily had gathered from the whispers that had circulated at the time. That had been ten years ago, and at the age of nine Lily had been considered too young to be told the truth. Some years later Molly had informed her in a fit of temper that she was no better than their mother, who had spent her time painting pictures instead of looking after her children. Ma, she said, had wasted money on art lessons, which culminated in her leaving home to live with her lover, which had created a scandal that had tainted all their lives. According to Agnes, to whom Lily had gone begging to be told the whole story, the man in question had been a louche fellow from an upper class background who should have known better. Lily had no cause to doubt Aggie, who had worked for the Delamare family since she was a girl of fifteen and had been a surrogate mother to the Larkin

girls after their mother abandoned them. Lily had spent what was left of her childhood living in a dream world she created in her head. She made up stories about her French antecedents having fled to England in a desperate bid to escape from the guillotine, although Aggie cast scorn on such notions and said they had been Huguenot weavers and not at all high up in the social strata. Lily had not been convinced. She remembered sitting at Ma's knee, listening to tales of wealth and family fortune, sadly lost. Ma had been a bit of a storyteller, but she had been beautiful and she had smelt as fragrant as a rose. Sometimes when Lily was tending to the gnarled rose bush in the tiny front garden, the scent of the red damask roses made her think of Ma, and it always made her cry.

Everything had changed after their mother's sudden flight. Pa had always been a remote figure, spending more time at the fire station than he did at home. Less than a year after Ma left, he had been killed in an inferno that had razed the gutta-percha warehouse to the ground.

The melancholy notes of a foghorn brought Lily back to the present. The yard at the rear of the dockmaster's house was being gobbled up by the fog. The gathering gloom had a yellow sulphurous cast to it and the air reeked of soot. Unless she was very much mistaken a real pea-souper was on its way. Very soon she would not be able to see a hand in front of her face and it would become difficult to breathe. She abandoned the mangling and hurried out into the yard, tugging at the garments on the washing line and dropping them into

the laundry basket. Wooden clothes pegs flew in all directions but she did not stop to pick them up. The washing was already speckled with smuts and large flakes of ash had begun to flutter to the ground like black snow. She angled her head, taking small breaths of the foul air, and her worst fears were confirmed. There was a new and more alarming smell polluting the atmosphere – the acrid odour of burning timbers.

Fire – the word sent shivers down her spine. Her three elder brothers had followed the family tradition by joining the London Fire Engine Establishment. Lily had never managed to accustom herself to the gnawing anxiety that filled her heart and soul whenever they were on a shout. She sometimes wished that she was a man so that she could accompany them and not be the one left waiting nervously for their safe return. Hefting the wicker basket into the scullery, she set it down on the deal table by the stone sink. She was about to close the back door when she heard the clanging of a bell and the thundering of horses' hooves as the fire engine was driven pell-mell down Labour in Vain Street. That could only mean one thing. The fire was too close for comfort.

Abandoning the washing, she ran through the maze of passages that had once been the servants' domain in the days when Grandpa was dockmaster and a man of importance. But that was long ago and now he was retired and had to exist on a small pension, a fact that he never allowed anyone to forget. Lily was only too aware that the house had seen better days. The walls were in sad need of a lick of paint and plaster flaked

off the ceiling to coat the worn tiles like fallen snow, but she was in too much of a hurry to pay any attention to details like worm-eaten skirting boards and missing banisters on the staircase that curved gracefully upwards from the once elegant entrance hall.

She tried to open the front door but the wood had swelled with the damp and she had to put her foot on the jamb and tug with all her might until it finally gave way with a groan of rusty hinges. She stepped outside and sheltering beneath the tiled portico supported by wrought iron pillars, she peered into the gathering gloom. The dockmaster's house was built on a promontory at the old Shadwell entrance to the London Docks. On a clear day she would have had a good view upriver as far as Sharp's Wharf and downriver to Limehouse Hole, but now she could barely see to the end of the garden path. She could hear the water slapping and sucking at the stone wall and the mournful moan of foghorns from across the water, but as the sound of the fire engine's progress grew fainter she was enveloped by an eerie silence. The London particular had the city and river muffled and bound, imprisoned in a thick noxious blanket of sulphur and smoke.

Lily had not stopped to collect her shawl and she wrapped her arms around her slender body in an attempt to fend off the cold and damp. She stood very still with all her senses alert. She strained her ears for the all too familiar crackling sound of burning timbers and cries of alarm, and through a thick curtain of fog she could just make out a faint red glow in the sky above the river. She held her breath, listening for the

reassuring clang of the second fire-engine bell and the accompanying sound of horses' hooves. If it was a large conflagration there was certain to be a second appliance sent from the fire station situated in a converted beer shop in Cock Hill. As soon as the call was raised, her brothers would have donned their brass helmets, fire tunics and boots and climbed aboard the fire engine. Even now they would be hanging onto handles fixed to the body of the horse-drawn vehicle as it sped through the streets towards the scene of the pending disaster. It would only take a few minutes to reach the wharves where the fire might have started in one of the many warehouses or the steam mill, or even on board one of the ships moored alongside.

She did not have to wait long and as the second fire engine rattled past the house she was seized by the sudden need to follow it and see her brothers at work. She picked up her skirts and ran down the path, letting herself out of the gate and racing along Lower Shadwell Street. The pall of smoke and fog was making it increasingly difficult to breathe, and she covered her mouth with her hand. When she reached Bell Wharf the swirling, stinking miasma above the river was as red as a blood orange. She could just make out the burning hull of a large vessel on the foreshore where it lay stranded like a beached whale. At the top of Bell Wharf Stairs she came across a small crowd of onlookers, mostly women from the flour mill a little further upriver. Their clothes, hair and eyebrows were coated thickly in white dust, giving them a ghostly appearance, but their anxious chatter was drowned by the

shouts of the watermen, dockers and seamen who had formed a human chain to take water from the river and hurl it into the centre of the inferno.

Lily realised that their efforts were being directed by her eldest brother, Matt, whose stentorian tones drowned even the loudest of the other male voices. Without stopping to think of her own safety, she made her way down the slimy stone steps to the foreshore. Holding up her skirts she stepped over the stinking detritus, weed-encrusted stones and muddy pools where shards of burning timber floated, hissing and spitting out sparks.

‘What the hell are you doing here, Lil?’

She turned with a guilty start and found herself staring into the soot-blackened face of her brother Luke.

‘I just wanted to make sure you were all right,’ she said defiantly.

‘Go home, Lily. This is no place for you.’

She hesitated, gazing helplessly at the blazing timbers of the schooner. ‘I can hear Matt but can’t see Mark.’

‘He’s working the pump and hose. Now get out of here, there’s a good girl. We’ve got enough to do without worrying about you.’ He smiled and his teeth gleamed white in his dirty face.

‘Look out there.’ Matt’s voice carried over the water.

With an ear-splitting crash the main mast of the vessel snapped off and fell into the river, sending up a plume of spray as it hit the seething waters of the Thames. A cloud of steam engulfed the ship and firemen alike, and there was a moment of chaos as men

stumbled about blindly in their attempts to dodge baulks of burning timber.

Lily did not know why she had come; something had drawn her to this particular conflagration which was beyond her understanding, but she knew that Luke was right. There was nothing she could do and she would only be in the way of the men who were struggling to prevent the fire from spreading to ships tied up at neighbouring wharves and the warehouses filled with valuable goods. She was about to leave when she saw a smoke-blackened figure struggling towards her. His pea jacket was smouldering and his whole body was racked by a fit of coughing. He was limping badly and seemingly unable to control his gait he barged into her, almost knocking her off her feet.

'I – I'm sorry,' he gasped, as his knees buckled and he sank to the ground, very nearly taking her with him.

'No harm done,' Lily said, making a vain attempt to raise him to his feet. 'Please try to get up and let me help you to the steps. It's too dangerous to stay here.'

He gazed up into her face, but another fit of coughing robbed him of speech. Flaming spars had begun to fall about them like a shower of meteors, but Lily couldn't bring herself to abandon him. She looped his arm around her shoulders. 'You'd best make an effort or you'll end up roasted like a hog on a spit.'

Somehow she managed to get him to his feet and slowly and painfully they made their way to the steps, but he stumbled and fell to the ground. 'Alas, my ankle – I think it is broken.'

He closed his eyes, lapsing into unconsciousness,

and Lily stared down at him in dismay. He was not a big man, perhaps a little over medium height and slightly built, but she would not be able to get him up the steep flight of steps unaided. 'I'll get help. Wait there.' Even as the words left her mouth she realised it was a silly thing to say. In his present condition, the injured man was going nowhere. She raced up the steps, almost bumping into a burly fellow who was on his way down. She peered at him through the choking pall of smoke and fog. 'Is that you, Bill Hawkins?'

'Lily?' He leaned forward, squinting at her through the sulphurous haze. 'What the hell are you doing here? Get on home, girl.'

She had known Bill all her life. He had worked on the docks since he was little more than a boy in the time when Grandpa had been dockmaster. Now he was a big, broad-shouldered foreman in the London Docks, but he still took tea with Grandpa every Friday evening after work, keeping him informed of the goings-on in his old stamping ground. Lily clutched his arm. 'There's an injured man down there, Bill. I think he's broken his ankle and he's soaked to the skin. I can't manage him on my own.'

He glanced at the burning wreck. 'All right,' he said slowly. 'Looks like there's nothing much I can do to help the boys. Where is this chap?'

'I knew you wouldn't let me down.' Standing on tiptoe, Lily kissed his bewhiskered cheek before retracing her steps to where the man lay on the muddy foreshore. She tried to rouse him but Bill laid his hand on her shoulder.

‘Leave him be, Lily. It’ll be less painful for him if we do it this way.’ He bent down and hefted the injured man over his shoulder. ‘C’mon, fellah, we’ll soon have you put to rights.’

It took them some time to make their way back to the dockmaster’s house and visibility was so poor that Lily had to keep stopping to make sure that Bill was following her. It was almost completely dark now and Lily had to fumble to find the doorknob. She glanced over her shoulder. ‘Bill.’

His booted feet crunched stones on the path behind her. ‘I’m here, girl. Best get this bloke inside as quick as you like.’

She put her shoulder to the door and almost fell into the hallway.

‘Who’s that?’ a querulous voice demanded, and the flickering glow of a single candle sent shadows dancing on the walls and ceiling. Grandpa Larkin emerged from the small parlour that had in past times been his late wife’s sewing room. It was his domain now, with a single iron bedstead tucked away in the corner of the room and a wingback chair by the fire, which was kept going night and day, summer or winter. He peered myopically at Bill. ‘Is that you, Bill Hawkins?’

‘It is I, Mr Larkin, sir. Miss Lily found this poor fellow on the foreshore with a busted ankle and burns.’

Grandpa Larkin nodded and his eyes glittered with excitement. ‘I saw the ship on fire through my spyglass. Looked to me like a schooner, heavily laden. Went aground in the fog, did she?’

Lily laid her hand on his shoulder. ‘Go and sit down,

Grandpa. Let Bill take the poor man upstairs and then he can come and tell you all about it.'

He drew away from her, scowling. 'I ain't a baby. You don't have to treat me like I was made of spun glass and going to break any minute.'

Bill gave a polite cough. 'Begging your pardon, guvner, but this fellow is no light weight. May I be so bold as to suggest that I follow Miss Lily up the stairs and make him comfortable?'

'You're a good fellow, Bill. I trained you and I'm proud of you.' Grandpa shot a resentful look at Lily. 'And he treats me like a man with all his faculties. I'm not ready for my wooden box just yet.'

'Of course not, Grandpa.' Lily knew better than to take offence at his caustic comments. She flashed him a smile and hurried over to a table at the foot of the stairs where the night candles were kept in readiness to light the family to bed.

Grandpa wagged his finger at her. 'Just remember that we can't afford to pay the doctor. You'll have to get Agnes to fix him up, that is if the old besom can manage the stairs at her time of life.' He retreated into the parlour, slamming the door. The draught it caused almost extinguished the lucifer that Lily had struck on a piece of exposed brickwork where the plaster had crumbled away to leave a jagged crater. She lit the candle, and shielding the flame with her cupped hand she led the way up the wide staircase to the first floor landing, and then up again to the attics beneath the mansard roof. It was here they had had their nursery when they were children, but now the rooms were

unused, it being too costly to light fires to heat them. Tiles had been blown off in winter gales and the roof leaked, causing damp patches to spread across the ceiling making patterns that Lily had always likened to illustrations of continents in the school atlas. She opened the door to the smallest of the three rooms and wrinkled her nose at the pervasive smell of damp and dry rot. 'Lie him down on the bed, Bill. I'll go and fetch sheets and blankets.'

Bill crossed the bare boards in two strides and gently set his burden down on the bare mattress. 'You do that, Miss Lily. I'll take his boots off while he's out cold, but he's going to need a doctor and that's a fact.'

Lily screwed up her face as Bill started to ease the boot off the afflicted limb. 'You'd best get his wet clothes off too. I'll see if I can find him a clean nightshirt.'

'This fellow ain't no ordinary seaman. These boots cost more than I could earn in a six-month. He's a gentleman unless I'm very much mistaken and a foreigner too. He must have come off that French schooner that's causing all the trouble.'

'Feel in his pockets. Maybe he's got enough money to pay for the doctor.'

Bill raised the man just enough to take off his singed jacket. He went through the pockets and produced a handful of coins. 'That's all he's got, and it's foreign money, but I reckon it might pay for a visit from the sawbones.'

Lily frowned; one problem at a time was quite enough. 'I'll see to his bedding.'

She hurried downstairs to the linen cupboard on the

ground floor, where she sorted out cotton sheets that had been turned top to bottom many times before being cut and sewn together again, sides to middle. She and her sisters had spent many evenings on such homely tasks, sewing long seams in the flickering light of a work candle until their eyes were red-rimmed and their fingers pricked and bleeding. She found an old pillow with the feathers seeping from a tear that was yet to be mended, but there were no spare blankets. The poor man would freeze to death in the attic room, but then she remembered the monks' seat in the entrance hall where out of sentiment they had stored the horse blanket that used to keep old Trotter warm on bitter winter nights. He had been more than a faithful old horse who pulled the dog cart that took Ma and the girls to church on Sundays. He had been a much-loved family pet and they had all cried when he had passed away at the magnificent age of thirty. At least, the girls had cried, and although her brothers had shrugged their shoulders and walked away, Lily had seen them blink away a tear or two. She sniffed and swallowed hard at the memory. She went to fetch the woollen blanket that was now lacy with moth holes, but it would have to suffice. Holding the coarse material to her cheek the lingering smell of horseflesh, leather and hay brought back memories of childhood days when life had seemed so safe and secure.

An agonised cry from the top floor brought her abruptly back to the present and she negotiated the stairs as fast as she could beneath the burden of sheets, the horse blanket and an old nightshirt that had once belonged to Luke but had been outgrown. She hesitated

outside the attic room, bracing herself for what she would find when she entered. She was particularly squeamish when it came to blood and burns. 'Don't be a coward, Lily,' she whispered. 'Stop being a baby and go inside. The poor fellow needs you.'

Bill rose to his feet as she entered the room. 'I'll see to him, Miss Lily. It ain't the sort of thing you ought to rest your young eyes on, but you should send for the doctor to take a look at the poor bloke. He's suffered some burns to his hands and shoulders and his ankle is definitely busted.' He held his hands out to take the bedding.

She tried not to look but her eyes were drawn to the inert figure with nothing to cover him other than his torn and singed shirt. Lily had seen her brothers' bare flesh on bath nights when they were much younger, but the only adult male bodies she had seen were the carved statues in museums and their manhood was always delicately concealed by fig leaves or artistic swathes of cloth. She felt the blood rush to her cheeks and she looked away quickly. 'I'll go at once, if you'll just stay with him until I return.'

Bill nodded and grinned, exposing his one good tooth. 'You get along. I'll keep an eye on the poor bugger until you get back.' It was his turn to flush brick red now and he shuffled his feet. 'Begging your pardon, Miss Lily.'

Lily hurried from the room, but once outside the dingy attic her feeling of relief was tinged with guilt for being such a ninny. Her brothers would tease her mercilessly if they found out that she had run away

from the sight of blood and burnt flesh, an occupational hazard for a fireman. When she reached the hall she stopped to put on her shawl, and was wrapping it around her shoulders when the front door rattled and burst open to admit Nell. Drops of moisture glistened on the rim of her bonnet, sparkling like diamonds on the dark hair that had escaped from the confines of a snood and now curled around her forehead like the springs from a watch. She untied the ribbons of her bonnet, eyeing Lily curiously.

‘What a sight you look. Your hair is a mass of tangles and you’re covered in smuts. Don’t tell me you went out in this pea-souper.’

‘I can’t stop,’ Lily said breathlessly. ‘It’s a long story, but I’ve got to fetch the doctor.’ She made for the door, but Nell was too quick for her and she moved swiftly to bar her way.

‘Who needs the doctor?’ she asked anxiously. ‘Is it Grandpa?’

Lily shook her head. ‘No, it’s a man who was hurt when the ship caught fire. Bill’s with him now. I’ve got to go.’

Nell caught her by the wrist. ‘Stop there, young lady. Who said we could afford the doctor for a complete stranger, and why is Bill here? It’s not Friday.’

Lily could see by the determined set of her sister’s jaw that an explanation was imperative if she was to be allowed out to fetch the doctor. She launched into a vivid description of the scene on the foreshore, illustrating the story with dramatic gestures. ‘So you see I must fetch Dr Macpherson or the poor man will die.’

Nell made a show of hanging up her bonnet and shawl, moving with the controlled grace that Lily admired so much. Nell was never in a dither; she was always so calm and sensible. Lily wished very much that she could be like her eldest sister.

‘I will go and see this person,’ Nell said firmly. ‘I’ll decide whether or not we need to incur the expense of a visit from the doctor. I’m certain he charges by the minute, if not the second, and we just can’t afford it, Lily.’

Lily hung her head. ‘I know that, but the poor chap had a little money on him.’

‘Don’t tell me that you went through his pockets.’

‘Bill did, not me. He said the man is a gentleman. He could tell by his boots. I didn’t think . . .’

‘No, Lily, you didn’t think. You never do. Just leave everything to me. I’m used to dealing with cuts and bruises and wiping bloody noses at the Ragged School, and that includes dealing with children who wet their drawers and worse.’ Nell picked up her skirts and was about to mount the stairs when she paused, looking over her shoulder. ‘Where is he? I hope you didn’t put him in any of our rooms. He might be running with fleas and lice or have some terrible disease. You are very thoughtless at times, Lily.’

‘He’s in the smallest attic room. I couldn’t find any blankets so I took the one that belonged to old Trotter.’

‘Heavens above, what were you thinking of? If he didn’t have fleas when he arrived, he most likely will now.’ With a toss of her head, Nell continued on her way upstairs.

Lily hesitated, unsure whether or not to follow her, but whichever course she chose was almost certain to be the wrong one. She loved and admired her eldest sister, but Nell was inclined to bring the discipline of the schoolroom home with her. Matt was the only one who could stand up to her when she was being bossy, but he wasn't here. Lily stood in the middle of the hallway, undecided until she heard the sound of shuffling footsteps approaching from the back of the house.

'Lily Larkin, I want a word with you.' Aggie's voice rolled round the hall like thunder.

It was only then that Lily remembered the basket of damp washing that she had abandoned in the scullery, and the wet clothes waiting to be put through the mangle she had left in the stone sink. 'Oh, bother!' she murmured. 'Now I'm for it.'

Preceded by a wavering beam of candlelight, Agnes bore down on her, moving faster than Lily would have thought possible for a woman who complained so bitterly about her rheumatics.

'What do you mean by leaving the scullery swimming in water and piles of wet clothes clogging my sink?' Agnes came to a halt in front of Lily, standing arms akimbo. 'And what's been going on upstairs? I was having a lovely nap when I was woken by the sound of someone screeching like they was being done in.'

Lily could see that Agnes was genuinely upset. 'I'm so sorry, Aggie. I'll come and clear it up right away. But it wasn't my fault, you see the fog came down and then I smelt smoke and I heard the fire engine go past the house.'

'I heard it but I thought I was dreaming. I still get nightmares about the fire that took your poor father's life.' Agnes peered at Lily, frowning. 'I hope you didn't do anything silly.'

'I know I shouldn't have done it, but I wanted to see the fire.'

'How many times have you been told to stay away from fires?'

'I don't know why I did it, but I just had to go and see it for myself, and I came across an injured man. I couldn't just leave him like that. And then Bill Hawkins came along and he brought him home.'

Agnes glanced upwards into the dark shadows on the staircase. 'So where is this person now?'

'He's in one of the attic rooms and Nell is looking after him.'

'I suppose it's all right then, if Nell says so, but don't expect me to go fetching and carrying for a complete stranger.'

'Of course not, Aggie,' Lily said, giving her an affectionate hug. 'We'll look after him and you won't know he's here.'

'Get on with you, you bad girl. I can see your mother in you sometimes, Lily. She could always wrap people round her little finger if she chose.' The top of Aggie's head only came up to Lily's shoulder, and she was almost as broad as she was tall. Her prune-wrinkled face dissolved into a smile and she gave Lily a gentle shove towards the kitchen. 'Go and finish your chores, and then you can scrub the potatoes for supper to make up for me losing my beauty sleep.' She gave a deep

chuckle that made her whole frame shake and Lily knew she had been forgiven.

She was in the middle of mopping the kitchen floor where the water had seeped in from the overflowing sink in the scullery when Nell burst into the room looking unusually flustered. Her cheeks were flushed and there was a sparkle in her eyes that made Lily stare at her in surprise.

‘That man is not English,’ Nell said breathlessly. ‘He is burbling away and I couldn’t understand a word he said. Bill said he thinks he came from the French schooner, so that would explain how the poor man came to be in such a state. Anyway, I’ve sent Bill to fetch Dr Macpherson. I’ve done all I can for him but you were right for once, Lily; his injuries are quite severe.’

‘And how are we going to pay the medical bills?’ Agnes demanded. ‘We can’t even afford meat to put in the stew. The boys won’t be happy when all they get is a mouthful of vegetables and a soggy dumpling for their supper.’

‘We have meat once a week,’ Nell said sternly. ‘That’s more than most people round here can afford. I have children in my class who have to survive on bread and scrape, and sometimes not even that. They are so thin that their little limbs look like sticks and their faces are pinched and wizened so that they look like little old men and women. If anyone complains about their food just let them come to George Street with me and see how poverty-stricken people live.’ She ended with a muffled sob, turning away to wipe her eyes.

Lily dropped the mop and ran to Nell, wrapping her

arms around her. 'There, there, dear Nell. Don't be upset. She didn't mean to criticise, did you, Aggie?'

Agnes shrugged her shoulders. 'No need to get in a twitter. I was just stating a fact.'

Nell sniffed and dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief. 'I'm sorry, Aggie. I'm just tired, I suppose.'

'And you gave your dinner to the poorest children,' Lily said, angling her head. 'I know you did, so don't deny it, Nell.'

'That's by the bye. We have more than enough of everything, just not at much as we were used to.' Nell smiled with her lips, although Lily was quick to note that it didn't quite reach her limpid blue eyes.

'You tell that to young Molly when she complains,' Aggie muttered. 'That girl has ideas above her station if you ask me, just like her mother.'

Lily could see by the expression on Nell's face that this remark, although true, had hit a tender spot. Ma's name was rarely mentioned, and Nell in particular seemed to have suffered most when their mother took flight.

'I think I heard the doorbell,' Lily said by way of a diversion, and almost immediately, as if by some miraculous intervention from above, one of the bells on the board above the kitchen door began to jingle on its spring. 'It must be Bill returning with the doctor,' she added hopefully. 'Shall I go, Nell?'

'No, it's all right, Lily. Since I'll be the one in charge of the sickroom, I'd best take the doctor upstairs.' Nell's hand flew to her head and she patted her hair in place as she left the room.

‘Well, I’m blowed,’ Agnes said with a meaningful grin. ‘She’s changed her tune. If I was a betting woman I’d lay odds on the bloke upstairs being young and good-looking, even if he is a Frog.’

Lily stifled a giggle. ‘Don’t let Nell hear you call him that.’

‘I can say what I like in my own kitchen,’ Aggie said, rising to her feet and carrying the pan of peeled vegetables over to the range. She reached up to pluck herbs from bunches hung to dry on a beam in the chimney breast, and she sprinkled them into the stew, adding a generous dash of salt. ‘He’ll cause trouble, mark my words, young Lily.’

‘Who? Who will cause trouble?’

Lily turned with a start to see Molly standing in the doorway. The sulphurous stench of the fog clung to her outdoor clothes as if reluctant to release her from its suffocating clutches. She took off her bonnet and tossed it onto the nearest chair followed by her shawl. Her cheeks were flushed with the cold and her green eyes sparkled with curiosity. ‘What’s going on? I saw Dr Macpherson pulling up in his trap just as Nell let me in, but she wouldn’t tell me anything. She just pushed past me and hurried out to meet him. What have I missed?’

‘There’s a Frog in the attic room,’ Agnes said, slamming a lid on the saucepan. ‘And he’s going to bring strife to this family, I can feel it in me water.’

Chapter Two

'A frog? How did a frog get into the house? A frog couldn't climb all those stairs.' Molly stared at Lily with her eyebrows raised in astonishment. 'Could it?'

Lily dissolved into a fit of giggles. She felt the tension leach out of her as she saw the funny side of the situation. 'N-not a real frog, silly. Aggie means there's a Frenchman in bed upstairs.'

'A Frenchman?' Molly snatched up a carrot that Agnes had missed and bit off the end, crunching it with relish. 'Damn it, I would have been home earlier if I hadn't stopped to chat to Sukey Hollands. What have I missed?'

'You've missed a clip round the ear, young lady,' Agnes said heavily. 'You wouldn't dare swear if your grandpa was in the room, nor any of your brothers.'

'Oh, pooh.' Molly waved the carrot at her. 'They aren't here so I can say what I like. If you don't tell me everything at once, Lily, I'll scream. By the way,' she added, 'did you know that there's a ship on fire alongside Bell Wharf?'

Lily felt a bubble of hysterical laughter rising in her throat, but one look at Aggie's set expression was enough to wipe away her smile. She nodded her head. 'That's where I found the injured man, and it just so happens that he's French. Bill Hawkins helped me get

him home and he thinks the chap must be a gentleman because he was wearing expensive boots.'

'He could have stolen them,' Aggie muttered, waddling over to the table and elbowing Molly out of the way. 'Haven't you got anything better to do than stand around chewing a carrot? Shift your lazy body, my girl. Let me get on with my dumplings or . . .'

'Your brothers won't be happy if their supper isn't on the table when they get home,' chorused Lily and Molly in unison.

'Out of my kitchen,' Aggie said, pointing to the door. 'Out now, or there's no supper for either of you.'

'Anyone would think we were still kids,' Molly grumbled as they hurried along the dark passageway towards the room that their mother had liked to call the drawing room, where she accompanied herself at the piano after dinner each evening, and entertained her female friends for afternoon tea. The piano had been sold long ago and the curtains were so faded that all the original vibrant colours were indistinguishable. The floorboards gleamed with wax polish but the carpet squares were threadbare and the chairs sagged, with horsehair erupting from the sofa in springy tufts.

Lily ran to the window which overlooked the side of the house facing downriver. 'I can't see a thing. It's a real pea-souper out there. I do hope the boys are all right.'

Molly threw herself down on the sofa, lying back with her hands behind her head. 'Did you know that the plaster is falling off the ceiling in great big dollops? I wouldn't be surprised if the whole thing

collapsed on us one evening when we're sitting round the fire.'

'Thanks for reminding me,' Lily said, turning away from the dismal scene outside. 'With all the excitement, I'd quite forgotten to light the wretched thing and it's blooming freezing in here.'

Molly stretched luxuriously. 'I don't know what you do all day, Lily. There am I slaving over smelly tubs of dye and soggy silk and all you have to do is keep house.' She ducked as Lily tossed a cushion at her. 'Missed! You never could throw straight. Now, tell me about this foreign man in the attic.'

Lily went to kneel on the scrap of carpet in front of the hearth. She had cleaned the grate early that morning and she had laid the fire so that all it needed now was to put a light to it. She struck a lucifer on the fire surround and held it to the twists of newspaper nestling beneath the kindling. 'I don't know anything about him, except that he must have been on the ship before it caught fire. His jacket was singed and his hands were in a terrible state. I couldn't bear to look.'

'Did he speak to you? Was he young and good-looking or was he old and ugly? Come on, Lily, you can do better than that.'

Lily sat back on her haunches, watching the golden flames lick around the glistening black lumps of coal. 'I think he is quite young, but his face was very dirty so it was difficult to see what he looked like. He had black hair, I think, and blue eyes or maybe they were grey. He said a few words in English but he had a strong foreign accent.'

‘So how do you know he is French?’

‘Bill thinks he came from the French schooner, and Nell said he’s definitely a Frenchman. She’s the school-teacher so she should know.’

Molly snapped into a sitting position and slid off the sofa. ‘I’m going to take a look at this chap. Are you coming with me?’

‘I don’t know. Nell said . . .’

‘Never mind her. She can’t tell us what to do. Are you coming or not?’ Molly paused as she headed for the door, her delicate dark eyebrows raised and a mischievous smile flirting with her lips. ‘I dare you.’

Lily rose to her feet, shaking out her crumpled skirts. ‘You ought to wash first. Your hands are green and there are red spots of dye on your cheeks. You’ll frighten the poor chap to death.’

‘Nonsense. If he’s off his head with fever he’ll just think I’m a part of his bad dream. I’ll race you to the attic.’ Molly opened the door but she closed it hurriedly, turning to Lily with her finger raised to her lips. ‘Stay where you are. Dr Macpherson is just going upstairs with Nell.’

‘I wonder if the boys have got the fire under control,’ Lily said anxiously.

Molly made her way back to the sofa. ‘You worry too much, Lil. They’re big enough to look after themselves and it’s only a rotten old boat that’s gone up in flames. Now it would be different if it was a silk warehouse or the dye works. I would worry then.’

‘How do you manage to bring everything down to your level?’

'I dunno. Being selfish takes a lot of effort, but I just think of me all the time and I find that works a treat.'

'You know that's not true,' Lily said, giggling. 'You can be quite thoughtful when you try.'

'And you insist on seeing the best in everyone. You're doomed to huge disappointments in life, Lil. You need to be more like me. Expect the worst of people and then it's a bonus if they turn out not so bad after all.' Molly lay back on the sofa and closed her eyes. 'Wake me up when it's supper time.'

'I can't just sit around and do nothing. I'm going upstairs to see if Nell needs anything.'

Molly opened one eye. 'You hate the sight of blood and gore. You'll only faint or throw up all over him.'

'I'll just have to make an effort. I can't spend the rest of my life being squeamish.' Lily made for the door and was about to leave the room when Molly called her back.

'Wait for me. I'm coming too.'

'You're not so selfish after all,' Lily said, smiling. 'You do care what happens to the poor fellow.'

'If you're so interested in this foreigner he must be quite a catch.' Molly jumped to her feet and danced across the floor to push past Lily. 'I'm not leaving him to our resident ministering angel or my pretty little sister. If he's rich and handsome then I care deeply.' She opened the door and crossed the hall, pausing to light a candle before taking the stairs two at a time.

Lily followed at a more sedate pace, thinking that

the world had gone quite mad, and all because of a foreigner who wore expensive boots. She caught up with Molly outside the attic room. The door had been left ajar and Molly cocked her head on one side, straining her ears to hear what was being said inside.

A howl of pain made them both jump and they clung to each other, waiting for the next scream, but there was silence. Molly pushed the door open and they crept into the room. Nell was holding a candle to light the doctor's efforts as he bandaged the injured limb, but the patient appeared to be unconscious. Lily clenched her fists, praying that she would not faint as she fought down a feeling of nausea at the sight of an enamel bowl filled with water and bloodied scraps of cloth.

Molly moved closer to the bed. 'Who is he, Nell?'

'Go away,' Nell hissed. 'And take Lily with you. I don't want her swooning or worse.'

Dr Macpherson looked up from his task and he frowned. 'This isn't a sideshow, young Molly. But if you want to be useful go and fetch some brandy and a glass.'

'Isn't it a bit late for that, doctor? He's dead to the world.'

'It's not for him, you silly girl, it's for me.'

'I'll go,' Lily said, eager to be away from the stench of blood and burnt flesh. 'I know where Aggie hides the medicinal brandy.'

'Bring the bottle,' Dr Macpherson said gruffly. 'I don't want one of Miss Aggie's mean little nips that wouldn't fill a hollow tooth.'

Molly leaned over the inert figure on the bed. 'I wish

he'd open his eyes. I'm sure he's quite handsome underneath all that soot and grime. Shall I wash his face?'

'Leave him alone,' Nell said sternly. 'You can make yourself useful and get rid of these soiled rags. Fetch me some warm water and fresh cloths.'

'Come along, Molly,' Lily urged. 'I'll fetch the brandy and there's a sheet that's past mending. I'll tear that up if you'll see to the nasty stuff.'

'Oh, all right. But I don't see why I have to do the dirty work.'

Dr Macpherson cast a reproving glance in her direction. 'You look as though you've already been in a bloodbath, lassie. We won't notice the difference. Now get along with you. I have to attend to the poor fellow's burns and it isn't a fit sight for unmarried girls.'

Lily tugged at Molly's sleeve but it seemed that her sister was determined to have the last word. 'Nell isn't married and she's only two years older than me.'

'Miss Nell is a level-headed young woman, most unlikely to have a fit of the vapours. If she wasn't gainfully employed as a teacher I would be pleased to have her as my nurse. Now leave us, the pair of you. This young man needs my full attention.'

'It's not fair,' Molly said as she and Lily left the room. 'I want to be there when he opens his eyes. If I was the first one he saw when he came to he would be sure to fall in love with me.'

'He might die of fright if he saw you splattered with red and green dye.'

'Well I won't have the chance to find out since it will be Nell he'll see first, and she's the beauty of the family.'

Everyone says so. You and I are just pretty, although I am prettier than you. I take after Ma and you and Nell are more like Pa.'

Lily acknowledged this with a nod of her head. 'You are very striking, Molly. And you do have lovely copper-coloured hair just like Ma. Mine is just a pale copy.'

'No,' Molly said judicially, angling her head with a thoughtful frown. 'I won't allow that, Lil. Yours is quite pleasing to the eye, in fact it's your best feature. I'd say it was more gold than red, and I'm getting to be an expert in colours and dyes.' She held up her stained fingers, wiggling them and pulling a face which made Lily laugh. 'I'm an artist just like Ma.'

'I can't exactly remember her face,' Lily said wistfully. 'It's all misty and faded in my mind and that scares me. I don't want to forget her.'

Molly gave her a gentle shove in the back. 'Oh, for heaven's sake don't get all mushy and sentimental. She's not dead. She's probably living a life of luxury with that bounder she ran off with. All I meant to say was that I take after her in looks and talent; I'm not like her in other ways.'

Lily did not bother to argue, although privately she thought that Molly was exactly like their mother. She ran lightly down the stairs and was met in the hall by a gust of cold air and the choking odour of the fog and the acrid smell of burning as her brothers entered the house. Matt closed the front door, putting his shoulder against it. 'Damn door – I must remember to shave a bit off it.'

‘It’s just the damp from the river,’ Mark said, shrugging off his sodden jacket. ‘The wood will shrink back when the weather improves.’

Luke slapped him on the back. ‘Good old Mark, always the practical engineer.’

‘Well someone has to have their feet firmly on the ground. Your head is filled with all that poetry stuff you’re so fond of, and Matt uses muscle to solve every problem.’

Matt shook his head. ‘Shut up the pair of you. I’m cold, tired and filthy. All I want is to get out of these wet clothes and put some hot food in my belly.’ He took off his jacket and handed it to Lily, who was hovering by his side. ‘Hang it in the scullery for me, there’s a good girl.’

‘And mine,’ Mark said, draping his coat over her outstretched arms.

Luke turned to Molly, peering at her in the candlelight. ‘You look like a goblin, Moll.’ He thrust his wet garment at her. ‘Here, make yourself useful and see to this for me.’

Molly dropped it with a disgusted snort. ‘Do it yourself, Luke Larkin. I’m not your slave.’

‘Help your sister,’ Matt said sternly. ‘You can’t expect Lily to do everything.’

‘More fool her if she waits on three lazy lumps like you,’ Molly said, tossing her head. ‘Anyway, how do you manage when you’re on night watch and have to sleep at the fire station?’

‘We look after ourselves, of course,’ Mark said, grinning. ‘But now we’re off duty we’ve got three lovely

sisters to wait on us hand and foot, which is just how it should be.'

Molly narrowed her green eyes, glaring at him like an angry cat. 'I've been working hard all day too and now I'm going for a wash. I don't want our Frenchman to see me looking like a fright.' She poked her tongue out at Luke before heading off towards the kitchen.

'Stop her, Mark,' Matt called out. 'She'll use all the hot water on the stove, and I've had a bellyful of cold water today. I'm not washing in it.'

Mark strode after Molly and Lily heard a muffled shriek as he caught up with her.

'If we had the money we could have a proper bathroom,' Lily said wistfully. 'Well-off people have rooms just for washing and bathing. They just turn on a tap to fill the bath, and they have things called geysers to heat the water.'

'Yes,' Matt said, hooking his arm around her shoulders. 'And we've been called to several house fires where those contraptions have exploded.'

Luke held his hands out to Lily. 'C'mon, Lil. Give me those wet things; you're sagging at the knees.'

She flashed him a grateful smile. 'It's all right, Luke. You go and get dry. I can manage.'

'You shouldn't let Molly get away with it,' he said, frowning. 'She's a proper little minx and she should do her share of the chores.'

'I'll have a word with her after supper.' Matt sat down on a rather rickety hall chair and began unlacing his boots. 'So what was all that about a French chap, Lily? Or was it just Molly's imagination running wild as usual?'

Lily glanced anxiously at Luke. She knew she would be in trouble with Matt if he discovered that she had followed them to the scene of the fire. He was very strict about that sort of thing. 'I – er – Bill Hawkins brought him here,' she said, omitting her part in the man's rescue. 'The Frenchman must have come from the blazing ship.'

'That's right, Matt,' Luke said, with a conspiratorial wink aimed at Lily. 'I saw the fellow staggering about on the foreshore and the ship was a Frenchie, wasn't it?'

Matt kicked off one boot and began unlacing the other. 'It was, but I don't know the details yet. I'll have to get them from the owner so that I can write my report. The crew were a mixed bunch but mostly French, I think, and none of them spoke English. They were all taken to the Seamen's Mission.'

'Except one,' Lily added. 'Bill carried him up to the attic. Nell and the doctor are with him now.'

'Bloody hell, Lily. You shouldn't have sent for Macpherson,' Matt said, rising to his feet. 'We can't afford to pay his fee. The padre at the Mission would have seen to all that.'

'The Frenchman has money,' Lily said hastily. 'All it's cost us is a nip of brandy for the doctor.'

Matt headed for the stairs, his coarse woollen socks leaving wet prints on the floorboards. 'And the old soak will have finished the bottle by now unless I'm very much mistaken. I'm going up to sort him out.'

Luke and Lily exchanged worried glances. 'Oh, dear. Perhaps I shouldn't have told him that,' Lily murmured. 'I always seem to say the wrong thing.'

‘Don’t mind him, ducks,’ Luke said, wresting the damp coats from her arms. ‘I could do with a cup of hot, sweet tea and a nip of brandy in it wouldn’t go amiss, that’s if the doctor has left us any.’

He strolled off in the direction of the kitchen but Lily hesitated at the foot of the stairs, gazing dreamily up into the darkness. Her active imagination had been fired by the mysterious foreigner who it seemed was not just a common seaman. Was he the owner of the ship? Or had he been a passenger; a man of business perhaps, who had come to London to negotiate a lucrative deal? Taking the exotic stranger into the house was the most exciting thing that had happened since Ma ran off with the artist.

Her candle guttered and went out, but she did not dare light another one for fear of being accused of extravagance. Nell kept a strict eye on the house-keeping and she frowned upon waste of any kind. It was almost pitch dark in the hall, but Lily could have found her way blindfold.

A cloud of steam erupted from the kitchen as she opened the door. Pans of water were heating on the top of the range and a fierce argument was going on as Molly and Mark fought over a kettle filled with hot water. Lily was faced with the sight of Aggie brandishing the rolling pin and threatening to knock their silly heads together if they didn’t stop behaving like a pair of five-year-olds. Luke had stripped to the waist and was standing in front of the range, drying himself with a scrap of towelling, although it did little to remove the streaks of soot from his torso. His lips were

moving silently, which made Lily smile. She knew that he was reciting a piece of poetry as he always did when family squabbles became too much for him and he needed to retire into his own private world. He was no coward, but he would back away from a fight unless it was the last resort. Luke was the peacemaker in the family, Mark the joker and Matt the undisputed leader. Her brothers were so different in their characters that sometimes it seemed hard to believe that they were so closely related.

‘You are no gentleman, Mark,’ Molly shrieked as he won the tussle for the kettle and carried his trophy into the scullery.

‘And you ain’t a lady,’ Mark called over his shoulder. ‘You use language that would make a sailor blush.’

Scarlet-cheeked and patently seething, Molly went to stand by the scullery door, leaning against the jamb with her arms folded across her chest. ‘Well, if I do, it’s because I learnt it from my brothers.’

‘That’s enough, the pair of you,’ Aggie cried angrily. ‘If I hear another word from either of you, you’ll go and wash in the back yard. I won’t have such behaviour in my kitchen.’ She turned on Luke, who had begun to recite his poem out loud. ‘And you can stop your drivelling, young man. You fill your head with them heathen words when you could be learning the psalms or reading the Gospels. Your pa named you after the apostles, but he couldn’t have foreseen how you would all turn out.’

Lily hurried over to rescue the pan of stew that threatened to boil over. ‘Don’t you think it’s time we

had supper, Aggie? The boys have been working hard and they must be starving.'

Aggie shrugged her shoulders, bristling like a small, fat hedgehog. 'I won't stand for childish bickering in my kitchen.'

'Of course not,' Lily said gently. 'And I'm sure Molly and Mark will apologise for their bad behaviour.'

'Blame it on the fog,' Luke said dreamily, picking up his damp shirt and putting it on. 'Everyone goes a little mad in a London particular.'

Aggie cast her eyes up to the ceiling. 'What a lot of nonsense you talk, Luke. Make yourself useful and set the table. And move away from my range, I want to get the bread out of the oven. Lily, go and fetch your grandpa.'

Obediently, Lily went to the door, but she hesitated. 'What about Matt and Nell?'

'They'll come when they're ready. I just hope that greedy gannet of a doctor doesn't think he's going to get fed as well as drinking our brandy. There's not enough to go round for him as well.'

Half an hour later the family were seated around the kitchen table having finished their meal of vegetable stew and bread hot from the oven. Dr Macpherson had reluctantly gone on his way, but it had taken all Lily's tact and diplomacy to persuade him to leave before they sat down to supper. He had sniffed the air like a hungry hound and praised Aggie's cooking, adding wistfully that his housekeeper was sadly lacking in the culinary art. In desperation, Lily had given him what was left of the brandy, assuring him that it would keep

out the cold. It was a small price to pay, Matt had admitted reluctantly, as the doctor was notorious not only for having a hearty appetite, but he was inclined to linger after dinner telling tales of his past exploits while he smoked a pipe or two of Grandpa's baccy. Nell said she could understand why he had remained a bachelor all his life as no woman would put up with him, but she tempered her criticism by acknowledging that Dr Macpherson was a good physician. He had tended the young Frenchman's injuries with considerable expertise and given him a dose of laudanum that should make him sleep until morning.

Grandpa Larkin pushed his plate away and leaned back in his chair at the head of the table. 'Well then, tell me all about this Frenchie, Nell. Who are we harbouring under our roof? He might be a felon for all you know.'

'Oh, no, Grandpa,' Molly said hastily. 'He is a gentleman.'

Grandpa eyed her with a cynical twist of his lips. 'If the fellow is unconscious, how do you know what he is?'

'He wears expensive boots, so he must be someone important,' Molly said, giggling.

Nell frowned at her. 'It's no laughing matter. The poor man is in a bad way. He might not be able to tell us anything for days. Dr Macpherson said he's suffering from concussion as well as a fever. His ankle isn't broken, though. It's just a bad sprain.'

'Well, he's harmless enough at the moment,' Matt said calmly. 'With an ankle injury and a whack on the head,

he's not going to cause us any trouble for the while. But I suggest we ought to take turns sitting at his bedside until he's conscious and can tell us who he is. He may be able to give me some information about the ship.'

'I'll do it,' Molly volunteered. She glanced round the table. 'Why are you all staring at me like that?'

Mark pushed his chair back from the table, grinning from ear to ear. 'When did you ever offer to do anything to help anyone, Molly?'

'It's not the job for a young girl anyway,' Matt said, rising to his feet. 'We'll take it in shifts. Mark can do midnight until two, Luke can do the next watch and I'll take over at four. If the fellow comes to his senses by morning I'll be in a position to find out exactly who he is.'

'Well, I'm glad you didn't include me in your grand plan,' Grandpa said. 'I don't hold with taking strangers into the house; especially not foreigners. They're all right in their place, but that doesn't mean that I have to trust them, especially in a home filled with young females.' He tapped the side of his nose and winked at Matt. 'If you get my meaning.'

'I do, Grandpa. And I agree with you. Nell can tend to the fellow, but I want Molly and Lily to keep away from him, at least until we know more about his background.' Matt took a pan of hot water from the range. 'I'm going to have a strip-wash, so you girls keep out until I've done.' He glanced over his shoulder at Luke. 'And it wouldn't hurt you to do the same. I can see the tidemark round your neck from here.' He strode into the scullery and closed the door.

Grandpa struggled to his feet. 'I'm going to my room, but I'll take a cup of cocoa at nine, if it's not too much trouble for one of you girls.' He looked round the table but Aggie was piling the plates up ready to be taken to the scullery, and when no one volunteered he adopted a martyred expression and sighed heavily. 'You'd think that one of you healthy young girls would take care of their aged grandpa.'

Lily glanced at Nell and Molly and she could see that neither of them was going to offer. 'I'll see to your cocoa, Grandpa.' She was just as tired as the rest of them, but since everyone expected her to act as unpaid skivvy she knew she was outnumbered.

'Good girl, Lily,' Grandpa said with a nod of approval. 'I know I can always count on you.' He shuffled out of the room, holding his hand to his back as if to demonstrate his disability, which seemed to shift to different parts of his anatomy according to his needs.

'He's an old fraud,' Mark said as the door closed on their grandfather. 'I've seen him nip around like a two-year-old when he thought no one was looking.' He slapped Luke on the shoulder. 'C'mon, fellow, let's leave the women to do their work.'

'Eh? What's up?' Luke gave a start, looking like someone awakened from a deep sleep. 'What's the matter?'

'You were day-dreaming, as usual,' Nell said with a reproving frown.

'I expect he was making up one of his boring poems.' Molly made a face at Luke who was blinking like a startled owl.

Lily felt instantly sorry for him. Poor Luke was always the butt of Mark's jokes, and Molly was just as bad. She gave him an encouraging smile.

Aggie was not so sympathetic. 'Both of you boys can get out of my kitchen. I want this place cleaned up so that I can sit by the fire and put my feet up.'

'Get up you jackass.' Mark chuckled as he dragged Luke's chair away from the table, tipping it so that his brother slid from his seat.

'Can't you leave a fellow in peace?' Luke grumbled.

'You heard what Aggie said. You're in the way, little brother.' Mark cuffed him gently round the head. 'The girls have the clearing up to do so you'd best go and soliloquise somewhere else.'

Luke grinned sheepishly. 'Sorry, Aggie. I was miles away. I'll go now.'

'Men. You're all the same,' Molly called after them as they left the kitchen. 'That's right; leave us to do all the work.' She pointed to their chairs, carelessly abandoned without having been tucked back under the table. 'They expect to be waited on hand and foot. You'd think we were their blooming slaves.'

'That's just the way it is,' Nell said calmly. 'And probably the way it will always be. Don't forget they were risking their lives fighting that fire, so perhaps we should be glad to look after them.'

'Nell's right, it's the way of the world.' Aggie lowered herself into her chair by the range. 'Women were put on this earth to look after their men. I don't know what the good Lord was about, but that's how it's always been and that's how it will continue. Anyway, I've done

my bit for you all today. It's your job to wash and dry the dishes when Matt has finished in the scullery. I'm going to have forty winks and I don't want to hear you girls squabbling.'

'Bloody hell,' Molly muttered beneath her breath but just loud enough for Lily to hear. 'There must be more to life than this. I'm going to marry the first rich bloke that asks me.'

Nell stood up, brushing crumbs from her skirt. 'I'm going to check on my patient, just to make sure he's all right.'

Molly waited until the door closed behind her sister and she shook her fist. 'She always manages to get out of doing the washing up.'

Aggie opened one eye. 'She does her fair share. Nell took on the housekeeping when your ma ran off and you should be grateful to her. By the way, someone needs to go out into the yard and fetch water from the pump.'

Lily sighed. 'I'll do it or else you'll spend the whole evening grumbling.'

'Right,' Molly said, perking up visibly. 'Good girl.'

It was past eight o'clock by the time they had washed the dishes and put them away. Aggie might pretend to be asleep but she opened her eyes every so often to inspect their work and she insisted that the floor had to be swept and mopped and the table set for breakfast next morning.

After she had finished her chores Lily escaped to the privacy of the bedchamber she shared with Molly and Nell. Everyone else, apart from Aggie who slept in a