

October 1826

Prologue

“Da, Da,” Katie shook the shoulder of her inert father.
“Da,” Katie’s grip on her father increased, becoming urgent.

Her father groaned and lifted his arm, shielding his eyes from the sun streaming in through the open door.

“Abby?”

“No. Da. It’s me. Katie. Kaitleen.”

“Katie,” the word was a moan.

“You have to wake up Da.”

“Leave me alone.”

“But Da –”

With a growl her father rolled over and presented his back to her. Katie viewed the matted hair, the unkempt beard, and the creased clothes that he had slept in these past three weeks, and fought back the tears. This was not the father she knew and loved – what had happened to him?

“Da –”

“Katie-girl.” Katie turned at the sound of her brother’s voice.
“Let him be.”

“But he needs to wake up. He’s been like this since Ma died.

He has to get up.”

Kieran slung the bag he was carrying onto the table. “Ol’ man Connor let me work in the shop again today. I’ve got some things for tea.”

Katie eyed the items as Kieran placed them one by one on the table: two small potatoes, half a loaf of dry bread, a mouldy onion, and a slab of salt pork. Not nearly enough to feed the six of them, although Da rarely ate these days.

As her thoughts turned to her father, her eyes flew once more to the still form on the rough bed in the corner. It had been three weeks since their mother had died in childbirth, the baby soon after. And Da had been in a drunken stupor ever since.

“What’ll we do if Da doesn’t waken soon?”

“I don’t know.” Kieran rubbed a hand across his face. At sixteen he was too young to have the responsibility and welfare of his four younger siblings thrust upon his shoulders.

“You should’ve let me wake him.”

Kieran was quiet for a long moment and Katie scrutinized him noticing the maturity that creased his once boyish face. With a shock she realized he must now be taller than their Da and when he spoke his voice was as deep as Da’s had ever been. “He blames himself for Ma’s death.”

Katie shook her head in exasperation. “Ah, is he stupid or something? ’Twasn’t his fault Ma died.”

“She died having his child. He feels responsible.”

Katie pictured again the funeral: her Ma’s coffin and beside it the smaller one. It had not been easy for any of them, but if Da would just awaken and start to care for them the way he once had, they would survive. She just knew they would.

Brushing at the tears that again threatened to overflow, she turned to the table and busied herself scrubbing the vegetables. Eleanor would return soon with the younger ones and they would be hungry. If she couldn’t wake Da, then it was up to her to look after the younger ones. Her shoulders slumped as she realised it was up to the two of them now: Kieran and herself. There was no one else. It was a sobering thought.



Samuel McKinnon closed the book with a sigh and glanced up at the un-curtained window. Only a few more weeks and he would sit final exams – and then what? He had no idea what the future held for him; no idea what he wanted to do. He still wanted to be a preacher that was certain, but where?

Standing he took two strides over to the window and looked out. The night sky was hazy with the smog of household fires and clouds that promised more rain on the morrow. Gazing for a long time at the moon as it passed between the clouds he reflected on the past six years.

They had not been easy years for this son of a Scotsman and his English wife. He had never known the country his mother called home, until he had left Scotland six years previously to study at Cambridge. His mother had died soon after he'd left, and only then had the family discovered that the lawyer her uncle had advised her to entrust with her inheritance had misappropriated the income that was to come to Samuel on her death. Furthermore, with his father ailing, Samuel had quickly realised that he would have to find paid employment in order to pay for the education he so dearly desired. Consequently in six years he had only once visited the land of his birth and seen his father and sister: a visit that coincided with his sister's marriage to his childhood friend.

"Mister McKinnon." Samuel turned sharply at the sound of his landlord's son at the door. Quickly he crossed the room and opened the door.

"Message. The courier says 'twas urgent." The lad thrust the slip of paper into Samuel's hands before hurrying from the room.

Recognising his brother-in-law's handwriting, Samuel sat down on the edge of his bed and slowly unfolded the message. With a sinking heart he read the words, then reached for paper and ink to reply. His brother-in-law had requested his immediate presence. There was no time to waste, no time to question, ponder or delay. He would leave at once.

January 1827

Chapter One

Rhiannon's Journal

January 1, 1827

It's snowing. Again.

Mother and I are confined to the house and have had to draw on all our resources to keep ourselves amused. I've done wool work and linen work and Mother even tried to teach me to make lace but I ended up with the thread in such a tangle that she gave up. I've read all my books and practiced the pianoforte and even helped Betsy clean the silverware.

And I am bored, bored, bored!

Today I found this journal that my old governess Miss Grover gave me before she left to marry Mister Napier. I thought it could be amusing to write in it— to pass time— although there's so little to relate.

What can I say about today that I haven't already said? It's snowing. It's cold. We're cooped up inside like chickens in a henhouse. There's nothing new and interesting to do. It's so dreary having to stay inside all the time. I was hoping that Grandfather would send the carriage for me so that I could at

least get out of the house but he hasn't. He forgets how difficult it can be for us to get about in weather such as this. Father must have the carriage so that he can visit his patients and that leaves Mother and I carriage-less and forced to sit and stare at each other for hours on end.

Oh, I'm going to go crazy if something doesn't happen soon.



Katie lifted her eyes from her mending and glanced at the handful of cabbage leaves Kieran placed in front of her.

"I'm sorry, Katie-girl. That's all I could find."

Clamping her jaw tight she sought to subdue the rising fear and panic before forcing a smile for her older brother. "It's okay. There's still some potatoes left over from yesterday that Mrs Blayney gave us. I'll be able to cook something. We won't go to bed hungry."

"Katie," Kieran's voice was sombre. "We went to bed hungry last night and the night afore. In fact, we're always hungry now."

"Ssh," Katie placed a warning finger to her lips and nodded toward the corner of the room where Brennan and Emily were curled up together asleep. Brennan's fifth birthday had passed sometime in the days following Ma's death – neither Kieran nor Katie could remember the exact date and no one seemed to care at the moment anyway.

"Where's Eleanor?"

"Mrs Blayney asked if she could mind her little ones while she went to market. Perhaps Eleanor will return with something to eat from there."

"Maybe," Kieran seemed preoccupied and Katie searched for the needle she had dropped when Kieran had laid his offerings down on the table. It wasn't until she had found it and was trying to thread the cotton onto it, that she spoke again.

"When Da wakes up—"

"Da's not going to wake up," Kieran's voice was harsh and Katie looked at him in surprise. "When are ye going to realise? Da's not going to wake up."

"Of course he will. Just when he—"

"No," it was a shout, and then as Emily stirred in the corner,

he lowered his voice. “No, Katie. Da won’t wake. He won’t stop drinking. He can’t live without Ma. Can’t ye see that?”

Without warning the tears spilled down Katie’s cheeks and she brushed angrily at them. “None of us want to live without Ma but we have no choice. But we can’t live without Da. We need him.”

She heard Kieran swallow and knew what he was thinking. Da wasn’t going to wake; they were going to have to learn to live without him. Somehow.

Fumbling for her scissors, Katie tried to hide her face from her older brother. “What are we going to do?” her voice trembled.

Kieran was silent so long that Katie at last felt compelled to look up but after one glance at his face she quickly lowered her eyes to her work. What had happened to her brother? The brother whom only a few short months ago had raced down the town’s streets and who was always laughing about the latest joke he had played on his friends, now with eyes dull and grim. It didn’t seem right.

When she heard him slump into the chair opposite she raised a protective hand to her heart. What could be making him look so serious?

“Kieran?”

“I’m sorry, Katie, but there’s no way around it. Ye’re going to have to get work.”

Katie heaved a sigh of relief. Was that all he was worried about? Why that was nothing.

“I heard tell in town today that they’re looking for girls up at the Big House.”

Katie gave a snort. “They’ll be lucky. Every one knows they can’t keep their servants. Even their English ones don’t stay.”

“I was thinking ye could apply.”

Katie dropped her mending and looked at him in disbelief. “Me? At the Big House? Ye’re surely not serious? Work for the English? Ye can’t mean it! Kieran, tell me ye don’t mean it.”

“Tell me, Katie, what choice do ye have?”

“I could try the shops in town. Perhaps the dressmakers ...” her voice trailed off as Kieran shook his head.

“I’ve already asked around. The dressmaker has just taken on a new girl and none of the other shops have vacancies. There’s nothing else for it but to go up to the Big House and see if ye can work there.”

“But what about Brennan and Emily? Who would look after them? I wouldn’t be able to come home each night if I worked up there.”

“Once a fortnight. I already asked.” His voice was resigned.

“Once a fortnight? No, Kieran, no. Please. I can’t leave ye. Not for a whole fortnight. Please, Kieran, please.”

“Katie. I’m sorry.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat at the sound of the pain in his voice.

“All right. But what about the little ones?”

“Eleanor can look after them. She’s ten years old – she’s old enough to manage.”

Katie nodded and looked again to the sleeping forms of her brother and sister. How she would miss them. How she would miss them all!

“So ye’ll do it then?”

“Yes, I’ll do it,” but she didn’t look at him because she didn’t want to see the pain and relief that she knew would be written all over his face. “I’ll do it, but as soon as Da wakes, I’m coming back. Understand?”

“Yay, Katie, I understand,” Kieran rose and moved toward the door. With one hand on the doorknob he turned and looked at her. “I’m sorry Katie-girl.”

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

Opening the door, he threw her a grateful smile. “Ta, Katie. Ta. Ye’re a good girl.”

Katie nodded, but as she heard his footsteps retreating on the stones outside she laid her head down on the table and wept.



Katie shifted nervously from one foot to the other as she surveyed the large stone house at the end of the drive. From the village it had seemed large, but up close it was bigger than any building Katie could have ever imagined. She craned her neck to see the parapet that ran around the upper floor but from where she stood it seemed to be almost lost in the clouds. How could a house be so big and who would live in such a house?

Reluctantly she started up toward the house. “Now, mind ye go to the back entrance, and not to the front. The front is not for

the likes of us.” Kieran’s words played themselves over again and again in her mind as she chose the service path that led to the back of the house. Had he really thought she needed telling?

Reaching up to ring the bell beside the huge wooden door that guarded the entrance, she paused. Surely there must be a better way. Surely...she shook her head. It had been a long day searching for work and it had been just as Kieran had said: no one in the town needed help. Several had been apologetic and some had waited until their shops had emptied of all customers— as if conscious of committing some crime and not wanting to be caught out – before telling her that there was work to be had at the Big House. She knew no one would blame her if she turned around now and walked back down the drive, but the faces of her younger siblings drove her on. Her hands clammy and her heat beating wildly against the fabric of her shift she lifted her hand.

Almost instantly the door was opened. “Yes?”

Katie stepped back in surprise. Dressed in black with starched white collar and cuffs the woman who answered her knock seemed almost as tall as the door itself.

Concentrating on keeping her eyes on the woman’s face, instead of allowing them to follow their inclination to look at the ground, Katie found her voice.

“I’ve come about the job, ma’am.”

“Then you’d better come in.”

The woman held the door open as Katie slipped through and waited in the shadowed room. As her eyes took a few moments to adjust to the dim room light, the woman moved past her and yet again Katie was struck by her size. She must be twice her own height!

Twisting her hands together as the woman busied herself at the stove, Katie took stock of her surroundings. She could now see that she was in a largish room with several rooms leading off in all directions. Along one wall was a large fireplace with an equally large stove, but apart from the stove with its multiple ovens, and a solid table in the centre of the room, there was nothing to indicate that the room was used for cooking. Through the nearest doorway she caught a glimpse of garlic and onions and herbs hanging from the ceiling. Through another door there appeared to be an assortment of ironware, woodenware and tinware and another door appeared to lead into a pantry that would have been larger

than the home she shared with Da and Kieran and the others. Katie had never imagined that one family could use so many rooms for cooking and eating.

Turning she noticed that the door directly opposite the back door was closed. She wondered if through that door the Master and the Missus lived. A few moments later, the woman placed teapot and soda bread on the table and gestured for Katie to take a seat.

Katie looked at her in surprise. Had she thought that Katie had come begging?

"It's a long walk from the town to up here. You must be hungry. Eat up and then we'll talk about the job."

Hesitant and unsure, Katie sat down at the long table and reached for the bread.

"Do you have a name, girl?"

Katie swallowed quickly. "Katie, ma'am. I mean, Kaitleen Donovan."

"Well, Kaitleen Donovan, and how old would you be?"

"Fourteen, ma'am."

"And why would you be looking for work?"

"Me Ma," Katie choked on the bread. Reaching for the cup of tea that the woman had poured for her, she took a mouthful before attempting to answer again. "Me Ma died three weeks ago and there's me and four other children and no food."

"And your Da?"

Katie shook her head, then realised from the look of compassion that filled the woman's countenance that she assumed that Katie's father was also dead. *Well let her, Katie thought, he might as well be for all the good he is to us.*

"My name is Mrs Mulholland. I'm the housekeeper. Your job would be to light the fires every morning before anyone is up, then to take hot water up to each of the bedrooms. Then you would be expected to clean and polish all the silver, after which you would scrub all the grates. You would also be expected to do whatever the Missus or myself asked of you. Do you understand?"

Katie nodded.

"It's hard work, Katie, are you up to it?"

"I can do it."

"You will start the day after the morrow. Uniforms will be provided and you'll be required to keep your hair off your face. You'll get one day off a fortnight, and you'll be expected to go to

church every Sunday. Are you agreeable?"

Again Katie nodded.

"Very well then. I expect to see you tomorrow at suppertime. Good-day, Katie."

As quickly as the interview had begun, it was over and Katie found herself once more outside, the bright sun hurting her eyes. *I've got a job*, she thought as she trudged down the path. She stopped abruptly as the initial relief she had felt at hearing that the job was hers warred with rising sorrow. She sobered. Kieran would be pleased, but was she pleased? It would mean staying at the Big House, leaving home and all she'd ever known. It would mean working for the English, perhaps being shunned by those she had known all her life. It would mean missing her brothers and sisters, not knowing how they fared. If only there was some other way.

Angrily she threw her braid over her shoulder. There was no other way. Not unless Da suddenly woke from his stupor which she hoped it would be soon. Until then she would work and help Kieran support the family. But once Da was better and able to work she would return home. Picking up her skirts she determinedly set her face toward home.



Rhiannon's Journal

January 18, 1827

Today I asked Mother why Grandfather rarely invites Father or her to Kilmore and she said that Grandfather enjoyed having me all to himself. I know that's not true. Grandfather hardly ever talks to me when I'm there but tells Missus Smythe to make sure I'm amused and fed and that I stay out of his way. I'm not even sure he likes me – even though I'm his only grandchild.

Some times I feel that Mother tells me one thing about Grandfather but believes another. Except for Christmas and Easter, Mother and Father rarely set foot in Grandfather's house. This past Christmas we didn't go because Grandfather said he was too poorly for guests and so Mother, Father and I celebrated quietly at home. Father has repeatedly offered to care for Grandfather but Grandfather refuses.

I would have thought that with Father being Grandfather's second surviving son that Grandfather would want to see him more often – but he doesn't. Grandfather had six sons but only the eldest and the youngest are still living. Sometimes I hear Mother and Father talking about Father's older brother when they don't know I'm listening. I know they don't approve of him, but because he is the eldest he will inherit the estate when Grandfather dies and Father will receive nothing.

It must be difficult for poor Father. His brother is down in London most of the year and doesn't care about the estate the way Father does, but it will not be Father who will inherit. If I ever get married and have sons I think I might arrange things differently. Why should one son inherit just because he was born first?

Mother says that I don't understand and that's the way things have always been done but I think it's time some things changed. It's not right that Father's eldest brother stands to inherit everything when Father is the one that works hard. It's not right that Grandfather refuses to talk to Mother when we are all invited to the House and he treats Father so abominably in-between times.

I wish I could understand. I know there are things that no one's telling me. I can sense it.



“So what now? Back to Cambridge?”

Samuel McKinnon turned at his companion's voice from surveying the distant hills that had once been as familiar to him as the freckles on his face and shrugged.

“I don't know. Eventually, I guess. I had planned on another term but I can probably afford to stay a few more weeks.”

He let his eye roam over the town below them: church steeple reaching skywards, smoke curling lazily from chimneys, housewives chatting with neighbours while they scrubbed their front steps, children playing in the snow that was melting in the narrow streets. All so familiar, and yet new as if he were seeing it all for the first time. How could he have stayed away for so long?

His companion pulled out his pocket watch, looked at it for a few moments, and then snapped it closed.

“I should have sent a message sooner.”

“No,” Samuel shook his head. “Don’t blame yourself, Angus, you weren’t to know.”

Had it already been three months since he’d received the message that his father was dying and to make haste? He had arrived too late to farewell the man who had been father, friend and brother to him through all his growing years. Instead he had arrived in time to greet the mourners at his father’s graveside, to see his father’s body laid in the hard cold ground beside the Kirk where he had served so faithfully all his life.

He sighed. At least he’d had that.

“And what about Elspeth?”

Elspeth. She’d been fourteen when he’d left Scotland for England to study. In those six years she had grown from a gawky young girl into a beautiful woman. He’d never expected to be away all those years, but working and putting himself through Cambridge had taken longer than he had expected.

He had no idea what to do about Elspeth now. What had once been easy friendship was now replaced with a new self-consciousness. He’d almost expected her to be married by now and with a child or two in tow. Or had he? He shook his head in frustration then bent down to remove a stone from his boot as his companion seemed intent on relentless pursuit to destroy every last shred of Samuel’s peace and resolve.

“She’s waited for you.”

“I never asked her to.” Samuel knew he sounded defensive but a man wanted to make his own decisions and in truth he was tired of everyone trying to organise his future when he had no idea where his plans should lie.

Angus smiled and shrugged. “You know women.”

“Well no, not really,” Samuel admitted.

Angus laughed and tried another tack. “You just have this one term left at Cambridge. Have you thought what you want to do? There’ll be a church here when you’re finished, if you’re interested.”

“A minister in the Church of Scotland trained at Cambridge? The forefathers will be rolling over in their graves. I doubt the Kirk Session would be thrilled either.”

“They’ll overlook it for you. They know what you are— who you are. It matters not where you studied.”

“Perhaps. But in the six years that I’ve been away I’ve seen churches that are drier than the kindling stacked beside your own fireplace. Churches that are no good for anything because they’re so dead. I’m tired of preaching to those that have heard it all before but have closed their ears. I want to go some place where the people are hungry for God. Some place where the people will listen.”

“Where are you thinking then?”

“India, maybe. Russia. Or even Africa.”

“Have you told Karen?”

“We’ve talked briefly but with her confinement close she has more important things to occupy her mind and busy herself with at the moment than spending time worrying over one errant brother.”

“Knowing Karen, she’ll be worrying.”

Samuel laughed. “You’re probably right. You would know her better than I do these days.”

“Aye. And she’s probably wondering what has kept her husband and brother these three hours.”

As one, the two men turned and started heading down toward the town.

“I’ve heard that they’re looking for spiritual advisors for the convict ships.”

“What?” Samuel was startled. The turn in the conversation had taken him completely by surprise.

“The convict ships. They each carry a doctor and a spiritual advisor now. And they need men willing to go out to Australia.”

“And why are you telling me?”

“You could go as an advisor. See another part of the world while you decide what to do. Perhaps even preach to the convicts and soldiers.”

“Exchange indifference for outright rebellion: is that what you’re suggesting?”

“Perhaps. But there’s hardly an over-supply of preachers out there.”

Samuel’s interest was piqued. “How would I go about applying for such a position?”

“I’m not sure but I could ask around for you if you like.”

“Good man.” Samuel stepped over the stile and sidestepped a dead ewe, trying not to let show how much it bothered him. If his companion ever found out that he had an aversion to dead things,

he would never hear the end of it. It was assumed that anyone growing up in these parts would be well versed in the ways of nature. “And meanwhile I’ll pray.”

“And Elspeth?” his companion asked with a smirk.

“I don’t know, but somehow I can’t see her on a convict ship or in a penal colony can you?”

And for the rest of the journey the men walked in silence.