

## 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 would fit a chicken coop.*

Swallowing hard, Kicker 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. Carrying a small sack with all her worldly possessions slung over her back, Kicker had walked only five miles from her home village, 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. Squaring her shoulders, Kicker 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.

As Kicker trudged up the long driveway, she 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.

As it was Saturday, 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. She 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. She had been proving herself repeatedly from the age of seven.

As a child, Kicker was underfoot and useless amongst her sisters in their mother's busy kitchen; her mother swore that Kicker was so inept she could burn water. And while repairing tack came easily to the girl, she could not sew two pieces of cotton together in a straight line to save her life. By age seven, Kicker had been permanently banned from more traditional feminine arts, and was restricted to cleaning house and caring for the family garden.

Her father finally yielded to her pleas, allowing Kicker to join her brothers in helping around his smithy. She had a decided knack for the work, but the girl's real strength proved to be with the horses. Even her dour father admitted that Kicker had a gift for calming and handling the beasts that were the cornerstone of his trade.

As the years passed, Kicker learned the ins and outs of the farrier's trade, mostly under the tutelage of her favourite brother, Adam. By the age of twelve, her father trusted her with his business, even more than her brothers. 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, not even slowing to examine the horses as she normally would have done. Even the exhilarating discovery that she would 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.*