

CHAPTER 1

THE BURNS FAMILY

Maryhill, September 1939

War was certain. In a matter of days, they thought. It was no longer possible to pretend that it couldn't happen. The news was too bleak. Charlie Burns had spent the last half hour by the fire with the Evening Times, his expression grim. He folded the paper and set it aside. "Well, now that Germany has invaded Poland, it means war all right, there's nae doubt about that." He had managed to get a few welcome days at home while his ship was loading. "What did ah tell ye when ah got back from that trip tae Germany? Ah said they were getting ready tae cause trouble, didn't ah?" he told his wife Mary, who was sitting across from him darning one of his socks.

"It's an awful thing a war, Charlie," she replied. "Dae ye think they'll bomb us?"

"Mary, when ye see what they're daeing tae the Poles, dae ye think we'll get any better?" Mary set her darning on her lap and dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief, causing Charlie to regret his outburst. "Ach, maybe they'll come tae their senses, Mary. Dinna upset yersel'. But Mary, we have tae talk about the bairns," Charlie continued.

They had heard on the BBC on Thursday about plans to evacuate children from the cities and the news had caused them to argue. Charlie had been in favor of sending them up to stay with his relatives in Fraserburgh but Mary had balked at the very idea. "A bairn's place is wi' its mother," she declared and held to her position so strongly that that had been the end of it. "You know mah thoughts on that, Charlie, and I haven't changed my mind about it," Mary told him.

"Ah well," he said, keeping the peace, "it's early days yet, we'll jist hae tae wait an' see what happens."

Mary turned to another subject that was a sore point between them. "Ah hope ah'll see ye at the kirk the morn," she said, in a tone that made clear what she expected his answer to be.

Charlie sighed. He had little use for kirks and even less for ministers. "Ach ye know whit ah think aboot aw that mumbo jumbo." But Mary was adamant.

"If war's about tae break out at any minute, dae ye no think the kirk's the place for ye tae be?"

The following morning Mary, attired in her best dress, tut-tutted when she saw Charlie. "Ye're no gang tae wear that auld thing?" she complained, looking at Charlie's cap. "Ye're only wearing that tae annoy me."

Charlie adjusted his bunnet. "Ah canna believe that God gies a fig whit ah have on mah heid. Whit's wrang wi' it? Besides, ah'll be takin' it aff afore I go in onyway."

Mary shook her head in exasperation. "Ye're a thrawn, thrawn man, Charlie Burns, so ye are." But, realizing she would get no further with him if she had any hope of seeing him in church, she said no more and went to inspect the rest of the family.

"Very nice Elspeth, ye're always that weel turned oot," she observed approvingly. "No' like some other folks ah could mention," she said pointedly in Charlie's direction. But when she came to Alastair her mouth turned down in a frown of disapproval. She grabbed him by the ear and looked at his neck. "Jist as ah thought," she said. She grabbed Alastair by the collar of his shirt and marched him over to the kitchen sink, where she proceeded to scrub him until his face was red and he yelped in pain. "Come on now, ah don't have all day. Get yer hair combed an nae mair nonsense oot o' ye." Alastair, thinking she couldn't see, made a face. "An don't gie me ony o' that or ah'll gie ye such a clip on yer ear ye'll no' forget it."

Done with Alastair she looked around. "Where's Ellen?"

"She say's she's no' coming," Elspeth said, a hint of satisfaction in her voice.

"What?" Mary's face turned a beetroot red and she stormed off. A loud argument erupted in the other room. Charlie shook his head. The commotion was cut short with a yelp from Ellen. Mary pushed her daughter into the kitchen. "Wid ye talk tae this daughter of yours? Ah canna dae a thing with her."

Charlie was getting annoyed. "Ach, wid ye jist leave the girl alane. If she disnae want tae go tae church whit's the odds? They'll only fill her heid up wi' aw kinds o' nonsense."

Mary glared at him. "See you, ah canna get a bit o' support from you wi' them. It's bad enough when ye're aff at sea for weeks on end an' ah'm left here on mah lane tae run the hoose."

Charlie changed his line of attack. "Ah thought you were the wan that was always going' on aboot whit the neighbors will think. Whit dae ye think they'll make oot o' this rammy then?"

Mary bit her tongue. The cheek of the man to provoke her so and cast up to her about trying to keep up appearances. *And it didn't help, she thought, that he's absolutely right. She had lost her temper. But how could you not with a family like this?*

Mary led the family down Maryhill Road turning now and then to urge them on. "Alastair, pick up yer feet. Elspeth, straighten yer hat. She looked at Ellen who brought up the rear. "Wipe that look aff yer face right now, lady," Mary ordered, "or ah'll gie you a good reason tae look like that." Charlie sighed and looked heavenward. *Thank God ah'll be back at the ship on Tuesday*, he thought.

At the door of the church Mary brought them up short. "Now, ah'm warning you. You better be on yer best behavior. An' you," she said, looking at Alastair, "nae mair o' your tricks, dae ye hear?" Two weeks before, he had smuggled in a peashooter. When nobody was looking, he had fired barley at the back of the beadle's neck. "Ah wis black affronted so ah wis," Mary told Charlie, who had irked her the more by laughing.

As they filed into their pew, Mary looked around to see who was watching them. Charlie sat down and fished in his pocket. "Wid ye like a mint imperial?" he whispered loudly to Mary who instantly shushed him.

"No ah would not," she whispered directly in his ear. Charlie put his pinky in his ear and worked it around. "Now whit are ye daeing. Wid ye jist sit still an' behave yersel'."

The beadle appeared holding the bible out in front of him with both hands. Walking slowly, with an obvious sense of his own importance, he proceeded up the stairs to the pulpit. With exaggerated solemnity he placed the book carefully on the lectern and opened it. Satisfied that it was at the right place he turned and headed back down the stairs, his arms at his sides, and exited through a side door. Moments later he reappeared, leading the Rev. David McKenzie. At the foot of the stairs he turned aside as the minister climbed to the pulpit and sat down. Immediately McKenzie bowed his head and, placing his right hand on his forehead, subsided into silent prayer. Whit a palaver, Charlie thought. Finally, after an appropriate length of time, the minister ostentatiously rose and came to the lectern.

Charlie fidgeted through the opening hymn, a prayer, and a long reading in which he began to doze off, until it was time for the sermon. He reached in his pocket for a mint but, at the first rustle of the bag, looked at Mary and thought better of it. As the minister read the verse that would be the theme for his sermon, the beadle came to the foot of the stairs and looked up at him, attempting to catch his eye. *Whit's the matter wi' auld McAllister?* Charlie wondered.

Mr. McAllister coughed discreetly until he got the minister's attention. The Reverend McKenzie looked questioningly at the beadle who beckoned to him. Looking annoyed at this serious breach of protocol, the minister came down the stairs. The two men held an urgent whispered conversation. Mary looked at Charlie who shrugged. Around them people were looking at each other and the church filled with the buzz of quiet conversation.

With a grim expression on his face, the minister returned to the pulpit. "I'm afraid I have some very serious news to relate to you. This morning, just a short time ago, the Prime Minister announced that Great Britain is at war with Germany." Loud gasps and expressions of shock arose from the congregation. The minister held up his hand for silence. "Although this news is not entirely unexpected I know that it is still a shocking turn of events and I trust you will want to be home with your loved ones." Charlie looked at Mary. After a short prayer the minister led them in the National Anthem and they all went out to a world at war.

They walked in silence up Maryhill Road, Mary dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief, Charlie looking at the ground. Elspeth tugged at her father's sleeve. "Daddy, whit's a war?"

He looked down at her, his face stricken, not knowing what to say. "It's something ah hoped ah wid never see again lass," he said at last.

A bright flash lit the sky, followed a few seconds later by a loud peal of thunder that rolled on and reverberated through the tenements. Mary held her hand to her heart. "Oh my God, Charlie, that made me jump." Then she laughed, embarrassed at the thought of being surprised by a thunderstorm. "Here we are, the war no' five minutes old an' mah heart is in mah mooth already." Alastair and Elspeth started laughing

then screamed, half in fear and half in delight, when another thunderclap roared above their heads. Rain began to splatter on the pavement as they ran the last few feet to their close.

They found Ida Gow coming in the other way with the Sunday Post and a bag of rolls. "Ah see ye've heard the news," she said, looking at their faces. "Ah lost a brother in 1917 an' here we go again wi' thae damn Germans."

Back in their kitchen, Charlie slumped in his seat by the fire while Mary put the kettle on the range. Alistair and Elspeth sat on the floor, watching their parents closely, made uneasy by their depressed mood. Ellen sat down at the kitchen table. "It's ridiculous them talking about closing down the pictures and the dancing!" she stated emphatically.

Mary turned to her. "Is that aw ye can think about at a time like this? Dae ye no' understand that we're at war?" Ellen pouted. At seventeen she felt she should be treated like a grownup and resented any interference in her life.

"Whit's war got tae dae wi' me gaun tae the pictures?"

Charlie looked up from the fire. "It's no' gaun tae matter whit you think about it lassie, we're in it whither we like it or no'." Ellen tossed her head and went off to sulk in the other room.

Mary started on Charlie. "Ye see, that's whit ah've been trying tae tell ye. There's nothing in her heid but boys an' gaun tae the dancin'. An' now you're going away again an' ah'll be here on ma lane." She burst into tears.

"But Mary, ye know ah've got nae choice in the matter. Mah ship sails on Tuesday and ah have tae be on her." He went over to his wife and patted her on the shoulder. "Now, Mary, dinna let the weans see ye in a state like that." Alistair and Elspeth began to cry. Mary wiped her face and went over to get the kettle that was whistling on the range. She poured some boiling water into the pot, sluiced it in the sink and put four generous spoons of tea in the pot before adding the water. Leaving the tea to brew she sat down by the fire.

"It's no' jist the war, Charlie. Ah'm that worried about Ellen. She disnae mind a word ah say tae her. She stays oot late wi' those pals o' hers and there's a new lad ower here every night lookin' for her."

Charlie nodded in agreement, not wanting to say anything that would inflame his wife's temper. He had his own worries about his daughter. Charlie didn't think there was any real harm in her, but she could be thrawn when she didn't get her own way. Mary had very set ideas about how people, especially young women, should behave. She was frequently at odds with her daughter. Mary was too hard on Ellen, Charlie thought. The stricter she was, the more Ellen found ways to annoy her.

Mary poured the tea. "Ah wish Betty wis here tae help me." Betty was her oldest daughter. She was down in Campbelltown looking after Mary's elderly and ailing mother.

"Could ye no' bring her back for a while?" Charlie suggested.

"Charlie, ye know how bad mah mother is. Without Betty ah don't know whit she wid dae."

Mary felt a tugging at her apron and looked down to see Elspeth, her face wet with tears. "We'll help ye Mammy."

Mary swept her up and kissed her on the cheek. "Ah know ye will pet and so will you," she said, gathering Alistair to her.

It was a hard leave taking for Charlie. The family watched him step onto the tram from the close mouth. He lingered on the platform to wave until the conductress chased him upstairs. Charlie found a seat and lit a cigarette. The brave face had been for his family's benefit. The arrival of the war had caused a rent in his inner peace. In the last war, apart from a few forays by German zeppelins, the cities had emerged without serious damage. He was certain that it would be very different this time.

As they came back into the close, Ida was sweeping out the back. "So that's him away then," she said.

"Aye, Mary said. It's no' that ah'm no' used tae him gaun away, mind. But now wi' the war ah don't know whit tae think."

"Ah know whit ye mean," Ida agreed. "Are ye gaun tae keep the bairns wi' ye?"

"Ida, ah just cannae bring mase' tae send them away. Mah man thinks ah'm wrang in the heid, but ah think if we're gaun tae die we should aw go the gither. What wid be the sense o' them growing up without a mither and a faither? Whit dae ye think yersel?"

Ida looked doubtful. "Ah couldnae tell ye Mary. Ah'm jist glad ah don't have tae decide that for masel'." Ida Gow's two sons were grown and working. The last thing she wanted was for them to be swallowed up in a war.

The next morning was the beginning of many trying and stressful days for Mary. To the daily burden of taking care of the children and minding the house was added the task of being the sole authority. Ellen, who could often be persuaded by her father's quiet admonitions, would push Mary as far as she could. Mary's exasperation only inflamed the situation and each day brought some new upset or disagreement.

After the early anxiety surrounding the declaration of war, the ensuing weeks seemed like an anticlimax. The German bombers failed to materialize. The only excitement had come early on when a barrage balloon had been struck by lightning and fallen in flames into Ruchill Park. And the only real danger had come with the rigorously enforced blackout. The darkened streets were causing many accidents. Mary's brother Ian became a casualty, earning a broken nose when he rushed to catch a late tram. "Ah forgot the bloody thing wis there," he complained later, referring to the baffle wall that workmen had placed in front of the close mouth that afternoon.

But then Death, thwarted by a slow start to the war, found a different path to Mary. On a cold morning in October came an insistent knock at the door. She opened it and stared in horror at her visitor.

He, doubtless used to this reaction, said politely, "I have a telegram for Mrs. Charles Burns." Her hand flew to her mouth and she reeled back against the doorjamb. The messenger held it out to her. "Are you ok missis?" he asked kindly. Mary recovered herself and took the telegram. She brought it inside to the kitchen table where she landed heavily in a chair. All she could think was, Charlie's dead. She ripped open the envelope.

The Post Office Telegram form held three strips of tape.

CAMPBELLTOWN
BURNS 783 MARYHILL ROAD
GLASGOW W2
GRAN DIED NEED YOU HERE =
BETTY

Mary's relief that Charlie was all right was quickly overtaken by grief for her mother. Then she thought, *poor Betty, what a shock for the young girl.* Mary felt overwhelmed. What was she going to do? Who would mind the children? How was she to settle her mother's affairs? With Charlie at sea she was left to draw upon whatever resources she could muster by herself. For a moment she felt drained with the worry of it. Then she heard her mother's voice say, "Don't you fail me now. Is this the way I brought you up?" Mary sat up straight and looked around, fully expecting to see her mother in the room. The words, the voice, had seemed so real that she shivered involuntarily.

A plan formed in her mind. Ellen was old enough to look after Elspeth and Alistair, and she would ask Ida to keep an eye on them. Ellen should be able to keep the house going. *She wants to be treated like a grown up, now's her chance,* Mary thought.

Ida was more than willing to help when Mary stopped at her door. "Ah'm awfy sorry to hear that," she said. "Wid ye like tae come in for a cup o' tea?" Mary declined, explaining she had to go down to the Post Office to send a telegram to Betty.

"Ah'll get Ellen to mind the weans, but ah just wanted tae ask ye if ye could keep an eye on them for me?"

"Mary, you don't need tae ask, ye know that. It'll be nae bother at aw."

"Ah do know that, Ida," Mary said, her gratitude plain. "Ah'm going tae see if mah brother can come doon tae Campbelltown wi' me. Tae get her decently buried and help me sort everything oot. Ah well, it's an ill wind that blaws naebody any good. At least now ah'll have Betty back wi' me again."

When she returned from the Post Office she put some things in a suitcase and went to find her brother. She met him on his way home from McLellan's rubber works. He walked down the road carefree and whistling until he spotted her. The fact of her waiting for him and the look on her face changed his casual expression to one of alarm.

"Whit's happened Mary? Who's deid?"

"It's Maw, Ian. Ah got a wire from Betty. Ah wis hoping ye could come wi' me tae Campbelltown."

"Ah well that's her away then," he said sadly. Then, reacting to her question, "Aye, ah'll get word tae the foreman. Are ye planning tae leave in the morning?"

"Aye we need tae be down at McBrayne's early. And make sure ye bring some decent claes," she said.

At home she broke the news to the family. She had expected the younger ones to be upset but was surprised and touched to see Ellen burst into tears. "Ach well, she was auld and sick," Mary said in an effort to comfort them. "It's maybe aw for the best." When their sobs had subsided she explained to them about having to leave. "Ah need you tae mind the hoose when ah'm away, Ellen. And ah have tae know ah can count on you. Ida'll look in on ye tae make sure everything is OK and ye can go tae her if ye need anything."

Expecting Ellen to make a fuss, she was surprised when her daughter appeared to be pleased that she was being left in charge. "There's nae need for you tae worry, Maw. Ah'll look after the weans and mind the place for ye. Ah ah'm seventeen ye know."

Mary went over to Ellen and kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks pet, ah feel a lot better now."

The next morning Mary and Ian boarded the MacBrayne's bus for the long trip to Campbelltown. For a while they looked out the window in silence as the bus worked its way out of the city along Great Western Road to Anniesland and then through Scotstoun and Clydebank. It was only later, when they were making their way up the winding and narrow road along Loch Lomond that Ian broke the silence. "Ah climbed that once when ah wis a lad," he said, referring to Ben Lomond across the loch. "It's that clear the day. It's often in the clouds and ye cannae see the top." Then, abruptly changing the subject, he asked, "Is there enough tae bury her?"

Mary, who hated to discuss family matters in public, made a hushing sound. Then she said quietly, "Aye there's enough and ah'm no surprised ye widnae know that. Ye're aye going about as happy as Larry, as if ye have nothin' tae worry about." Seeing the hurt in his eyes, she said more gently, "There's a policy through the Pearl that'll give her a decent send off. Allow her, she had it aw arranged wi' the undertaker."

"But whit are we gaun tae dae until the insurance shows up," Ian persisted. "Will the undertaker no want tae be paid right away?"

"Ah telt ye, she had it aw arranged. McClarty the undertaker is willing tae wait until the money comes through. An' it's a good thing tae that she had that policy an' aw."

They sat in silence after that, looking out the windows at the mountains. Snow had fallen on the tops of the bens. The cold, clear light glinting off it etched the dark rocks against the sky, in a crystalline brightness that hurt their eyes. The raw beauty of the scene brought forth a great wave of longing in Mary's heart - for the days gone by, for her grief of the moment, and the overwhelming sense of the mystery of being alive to see and feel it.

The bus climbed slowly up the Rest and be Thankful, dwarfed by the surrounding crags. Reaching the top, they headed past the dark waters of Loch Restil, brooding and still, and then on to Loch Fyne. They stopped in Inveraray, where Mary took out the sandwiches and biscuits she had brought rather than have to pay good money to buy food at the hotel. They walked up and down the front by the pier to work the stiffness out of their legs. The persistent, chill wind blowing up the loch soon drove them back into the bus. And then there was the long final stretch down the Mull of Kintyre to Campbelltown.

The bus rolled to a stop. Betty spotted then them and waved. She waited impatiently by the door until Mary got off. Betty threw her arms around her mother's neck. "Aw Maw!" she cried. Mary hugged her daughter.

"It's all right, it's all right," she reassured Betty. She led the girl out of the throng around the bus. They walked up Long Row to the house that had been Mary's childhood home.

"Ah brought her in a cup o' tea Maw, just like usual," Betty explained. "She wis just lying there wi' her eyes wide open. Ah shook her an' shook her but she just lay there. Ah went next door tae Mrs. Gourlay and she came over. She took me tae her hoose and sent for McKay the polisman. Then they came an' took gran' away."

Mary soothed her daughter. "There wis nothing ye could dae Betty." Mary put her arm around her daughter. "Ah know ye loved yer gran', Betty. Ah know it hurts, but she wis auld and no' well."

Mary looked around the living room, lit only by the dim light coming through the closed blinds. The air was heavy with the polish her mother had applied lovingly and often to the furniture that had been her mother's before. It all looked the same, but the still, closed in air of the place was lifeless, bereft of the spirit that had made that fireside so important to Mary. She felt hot tears on her cheeks and hugged Betty to her.

Ian shifted silently on his feet, uneasy and apart, unable to find a role that was appropriate for a man in this scene. Sensing his discomfort, Mary came over to him. "Wid you make sure that the arrangements are all made at McLarty's, Ian?"

"Aye," he said gratefully. "Ah'll gae doon there the noo and see them."

She smiled and kissed him on the cheek. "Are ye all right yersel?"

"Aye," he said sadly. "Ah'm sorry she's gone but she wis that sick, it wisnae much o' a life for her. She's better aff noo, isn't she?"

Mary nodded her agreement and Ian slipped out the door.

Later that day, a hearse from McClarty's brought the body to the house. Mrs. Gourlay and a steady stream of her mother's friends and neighbors arrived throughout the afternoon. Some brought food, others chairs or extra china. By evening, the work was done. Exhausted, Mary and Betty sat over cups of tea, feeling the presence of the dead woman in the next room as if she were yet a living entity. The coffin had been left open so that close friends and family could pay their last respects.

"Dae ye want tae see her, Betty?" Mary asked gently. Betty looked uncertain. "It's up tae you, but it's the last chance ye'll get in this world."

"All right," Betty decided. "If you'll come in wi' me."

Together they went in and stood by the coffin. The room was filled with the scent of flowers underlain by a fainter, more antiseptic smell, reminiscent of hospital corridors.

The corpse that lay in the coffin little resembled the warm, loving grandmother of Betty's memory. The face was not so much lifeless as manufactured, an artifice sculpted in wax. Ever after Betty would be deeply ambivalent about viewing her grandmother's body. She was glad that she had had the courage to say goodbye but sorry that her last memory was of a stiff mannequin that bore the evidence of the undertaker's attempts to make the dead look palatable to the living.

Maggie Gourlay had looked shocked when she found out that Mary planned to go to the cemetery the next day. "It's no' the usual thing for women tae go tae the burial. It'll be the talk o' the place," she had observed.

But Mary was adamant. "There will be gie few family there as it is," she declared. "So ah'll see her away mase'."

The next morning brought a raw day with rain showers blowing in from the hills and out to Campbelltown Loch. The blustery winds blew dust and papers into the air and stung the eyes of the mourners as they headed to the cars. Mary looked out at the town of her childhood. They passed Campbelltown Cross and headed away from the town to the cemetery at Kilkerran. The Loch was churning with the wind. Sudden gusts whipped the trees over. A succession of squalls was moving through, driving rain followed almost immediately by bright sunshine, as though a giant hand was turning on and off some hidden switch. As they approached the cemetery the sky turned dark and a cold rain set in, slanting down to shroud Davaar Island in a liquid curtain.

The rain relented as the cars pulled to a halt. The mourners exited slowly, stepping carefully around the puddles, fearful for their good shoes. They approached the graveside, coat collars turned up, umbrellas at the ready and huddled together in the raw air to listen to the minister. He started off badly by getting the dead woman's name wrong. Mary shook her head but said nothing. "It's a guid thing yer faither isnae here," she whispered to Betty who had to stifle a smile. She had once heard her father give a right telling off to a minister when he had disagreed with some inane remark the unfortunate man had uttered.

Mary looked at the cold wet earth piled by the side of the grave. She shuddered to think of her dear mother being laid so deeply under it. Mary closed her eyes. She had been startled by the clarity of the moment, her senses honed in an instant. Scent and sound came together to imprint the day upon her memory - the aroma of the wet grass crushed underfoot, the musky perfume of the damp soil, the seagulls crying out over the loch and the distant throbbing sound of a fishing boat working its way homeward that came to her in the still air between gusts.

Without warning she received the gift of seeing herself at a nexus between the past and the future. She realized the smallness and grandness of being human, her connection to the land and her ancestors. Mary thought of everyone else who had ever mourned a loved one in this cemetery and the countless others to come. Then came the awful realization that her children, born from her body, must come to this same inexorable fate. She wept too for the many mothers who must lose sons in this awful war that was just beginning.

As the coffin descended into the grave, the rain returned, cold and driving, to slip under their hastily raised umbrellas. Mary watched the water pooling on the varnished lid of her mother's coffin. She remained for a few moments before following the others hurrying to the cars.

Back at the house the men warmed themselves with drams of whiskey. Mary discreetly handed out sherry and port to the women in the delicate glasses engraved with thistles, kept her mother had said, for special occasions. There had been few enough of those across the years. Mary and Betty passed around the ham and the sausage rolls, the cakes and scones while making sure there was plenty of hot tea.

There was a chill in the air despite the fire that blazed in the fireplace. Gusts of wind sucked the heat up the chimney in great sighing drafts. The windows rattled and rain beat on the panes. Mary looked out at the storm.

"Whit a dreich day," Ian said, coming up behind her.

"Aye Ian, an' no' jist frae the weather. Ah wis thinking how a body's life comes down tae this. A puckle ham and scones an' a room full of people saying the same auld things. If it wisnae for the food and drink half o' them widnae be here."

"There's no' that many o' faither's family here," Ian observed.

"He didnae have a big family tae begin with," Mary replied. "After he died, most of the auld folk followed him. The young ones went tae Canada or America. It's probably for the best," Mary said. "It'll make it easier to close up her house without the family fighting over who gets what. Ah swear, Ian, ah'll never dae tae mah family whit hers did tae her."

They divided up their mother's furniture between her close friends and neighbors, except for the china cabinet, which Mrs. Gourlay promised to keep for Mary until they could arrange to get it to Glasgow. Mary put aside a few personal items as keepsakes for her and Ian. Two days after the funeral they made their way back to the city.

When she walked into her kitchen Mary was pleasantly surprised to find everything in good order. Ellen, a scarf tied around her hair, was wearing her mother's apron. She was up on a chair scrubbing the window with newspaper and vinegar. Mary looked around the room in amazement. The range shone and a pleasant aroma arose from the pot bubbling on it. A cheery fire burned in the grate.

"My, my Ellen, whit's aw this?" Mary said with evident pride.

"Ye didnae think ah'd let ye come hame tae a midden did ye?" Ellen said.

Elspeth and Alistair rushed to their mother and clung to her coat. "Ah'm that proud of ye Ellen. Ah couldnae have done better masel'."

Ellen drew out a chair. "Well, sit ye doon Maw, an' ye can try oot mah cookin' for a change,"

Charlie managed to get home for the New Year. "It's a guid thing oor ship has a Scottish captain," he joked. "Ah don't fancy mah chances if he wis an Englishman."

Mary was determined they would have a good New Year in spite of her mother's recent death. As she said to Ida, "Who knows whit the next year will bring? Or when we'll have the flour and butter again," she added.

"Are ye sure ye want tae dae onything this year?" Charlie had asked, quietly acknowledging her recent bereavement. "Ah thought aboot that Charlie, an' whit ah think is this. Who knows whit the New Year will bring in. This might be the last one any of us will see."

Charlie tut-tutted. "Och now Mary ye shouldnae think like that."

"You have tae think like that Charlie. Ah said, ah've thought aboot it and ah want tae have as normal a Hogmanay as we can wi' oor family and friends around us."

Mary shredded the suet for the dumpling. "Elspeth, pet, will ye gang doon tae Cochrane's and get me some mixed spice and mair sultanas." She had put by money, a bit at a time, to make sure they had a good

New Year. Charlie had found a bottle of whiskey and there was a drop of port and sherry for her female friends.

When Elspeth came back from the store she begged her mother to be allowed to help. Mary, with many tasks still to do, relented when she saw her daughter's eager face. "Ah well, it's about time you learned how tae make a dumpling." She turned a chair around at the table so Elspeth could climb up and work with her. "Now, just you watch an' see whit ah'm daein'."

Mary let Elspeth have a turn at the mixing but the dough was too heavy for her small hands. "Never you mind, pet, ah bet ye next year ye'll be a dab hand at it. Now here's the bit where ye have tae be very careful." She floured the cloth and carefully turned out the mixture on to its middle. A wonderful aroma of mixed spice and cinnamon rose into the air. Mary gathered up the ends of the cloth in her left hand. "Tak' a haud o' the other end an' ah'll tie it around wi' the string." Every year she fretted about leaving too much space in the cloth or not enough. Satisfied, she took the precious bundle over to the stove where a large pot was steaming. Lifting off the cover with a cloth, she carefully laid the dumpling in and replaced the lid. "Well, now we'll just have tae wait an' see."

"Where dae ye think you're gaun?" Mary asked.

Charlie, who had been trying to slip out quietly, stopped in his tracks. "Ach ah'm away oot tae see a man aboot a dug."

"Dae ye think ah came up the Clyde on a banana boat?" she asked derisively. "Ah know whit ye're up tae. Jist don't you come home morokolus. Are ye listening tae me?"

Charlie decided to brazen it out. "Ah'm just gaun tae hae a wee dram wi' Tam an' the lads. Ah'll no' be lang."

Mary hesitated. Seizing the opportunity, Charlie was out the door before she could say anything else.

Mary shook her head. She had seen what the drink could do to men and she didn't want Charlie to become its next victim. Ah well, she thought, Charlie had been a good man to her. If he wanted a dram with his pals she was willing to look the other way now and again, as long as it didn't get out of hand. When Charlie came back, she looked him over carefully. "Well ah'm glad ye paid mind tae whit ah said," she said grudgingly.

She laid out a great spread with shortbread and Dundee cake and sandwiches. The pride of place on the table was left for the dumpling. "Elspeth, it's time tae take oot the dumpling," she called out to her daughter. Only Elspeth was allowed into the kitchen. "The rest o' ye oot o here," Mary ordered. "Ah don't want ye under mah feet when ah'm getting it oot o' the pot."

Charlie signaled to the others to come away, but they lingered by the door, anxious to see how the dumpling would turn out. With hands made impervious to the heat by years of washing and cooking Mary grabbed the ends of the cloth and lifted the great mass of the dumpling out of the pot and onto a large plate. She loosened the string around the top and peeled back the heavy cloth from around the top, revealing the moist doughy surface. They savored the smell that hung so heavily on the air they could already taste the dumpling. Mary placed another plate on top. Balancing the dumpling between the plates she carefully turned it over.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Mary peeled the cloth all the way off, making sure not to disturb the moist surface. She stood back to let the others see. "Well, whit dae ye think?"

"Maw, it's grand," said Elspeth. There was a chorus of agreement from the others.

"Ah well," said Mary, pleased, "ah'll just put it in the oven for a wee while tae dry it off."

The dumpling that had gone into the oven looking gray and wet came out golden brown and magnificent. Mary brought it in and placed it on the table. Charlie beamed with satisfaction. He was more than partial to dumpling.

Mary, well aware of this, admonished him sternly. "Jist you keep yer hands off that until it's time."

The Gows came down and sat by the fire with the family. "Have another piece o' dumpling Mr. Gow," Mary urged.

"Ah don't mind if ah do," he said. "It's grand right enough."

Close to midnight Charlie went over to open the window. "Tae let the Auld Year oot and the New Year in," he explained. "Ah like tae hear the ships blaw their whistles doon at the docks."

From the wireless came the sound of Big Ben striking the hour. On the last stroke, Mary hugged Charlie. "A guid New Year tae ye, Charlie," she whispered in his ear.

"An' the same tae you," he replied. He raised his glass to everyone in the room. "A guid New Year and mony o them," he said.

As the others echoed his sentiment, Mary thought to herself, *how good a year can it be when we're waiting to see what the Germans will do next? And how many New Years will we have to face at war?*