

BLUE HAZE



Tricia McGill

Jacobyte Books

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For Bill, the wind beneath my wings, whose love, support and faith gave
me the strength to aim high and fly free.

CHAPTER ONE

March 1818 Sydney Cove.

A wind as hot as the devil's breath sent the longboat rocking. Isabella tried not to think about her roiling stomach as she raised a hand to shield her eyes from the sun that blazed down on them. Fear, like some deadly snake, coiled itself around her innards, sliding viciously into every muscle and bone, every part of her body, leaving a bitter taste in her mouth.

The woman Isabella now counted as a true friend groaned. "S'pose we'll 'ave to get used to this 'eat!" she muttered as she ran a hand around her nape and blew a strand of greasy hair out of her eyes. "'Tis hotter 'ere than it was on the stinking ship when we was anchored off Rio de Janeiro!"

Isabella grimaced. "That's a fact, Gracie." They had been forced to get used to a lot of things, a deep and abiding despair more than anything else.

"These blooming six days we've been stuck out on the water 'ave seemed longer than the whole bloody voyage!" Gracie grumbled. "Gawd but it'll be good to get me old feet on solid ground again."

Isabella wrapped her arms about her middle and shuddered, swallowing the bile that threatened to choke her. "I don't ever want to see the ocean again as long as I live, Gracie!" Much as she might wish she were back in Stepney, she would never want to repeat that dreadful voyage. A violent storm lasting for nearly two days coming round the Cape had caused such wretchedness they had feared they would all perish. No, she wouldn't care if she never saw the ocean again.

Gracie nudged Isabella as the wharf loomed before them. "Well, girl, 'ere we go. 'ow d'ya feel, eh?"

"As if a mess of worms are wriggling about inside me, that's how."

Even when evading the constables in the alleyways and back lanes of Stepney Isabella had always felt that one day things would improve. That certainty had died on the day of her arrest. Gracie had tried to give her some hope for better days ahead, but Isabella knew that a woman in her position had little hope for anything in life, least of all a bright future.

Gracie winked broadly at one of the sailors who were now getting ready to stow the oars. He blew her a raspberry and she chortled. Isabella had no idea how she would get by without Gracie. The older

woman had been like a rock on the awful voyage. Dougal too. She saw the Scot now on one of the other longboats, which was carrying cargo. She waved and his plain face reddened as he shot her a cautious grin.

The first mate made a rude gesture. "Right, you lot!" he shouted. "Get a move on. The time has arrived for you to leave this illustrious vessel. Steady now, we don't want you falling in the drink and spoiling your nice clothes, do we?" He sketched a bow. "This here's Government Wharf."

Isabella felt like pushing him into the sea, but the small moment's triumph wouldn't be worth the punishment she knew him capable of dishing out. How she hated him. Sweat trickled between her breasts and ran down her legs as she trembled as much with fear as with anticipation.

The man leered and suddenly grabbed her arm. "Now we'll see 'ow you'll manage without that Scottish dolt watching over you every step of the way. You got away with it on the ship, slut, but let's see how you like having one of those toffs putting his hands under your shift, eh?" He grinned evilly as he nodded to the men milling about on the wharf. "And not only his hands. He'll be poking on you with more than his hands, mark my words."

Isabella squirmed. "Let me go!" But he tightened his grip until she thought her arm might break.

"I will, after you gives me a little thank you kiss for being so nice to you." Before she could back off he pressed his wet sloppy mouth over hers.

Suddenly he was pushed aside. He had to let her go or head into the water as the women jostled to be first off the boat.

"All right, all right, don't shove," one of them shouted, elbowing Gracie.

Gracie threw herself bodily at the first mate. "Whoops, must 'ave tripped," she said with a grin.

Isabella wiped her mouth on the hem of her skirt, and jumped swiftly onto the dock. The first mate shook a fist at Gracie and she waved audaciously to him. He cursed loudly.

Gracie muttered, "Just look at that Marjorie, carrying on like the doxie she is."

A buxom woman on one of the other boats lifted her skirts and shook a leg, making the boat wobble dangerously. The sailors guffawed. Some of the women made lewd gestures and shouted obscenely to the

sailors as they climbed out, adding to the crew's amusement.

Isabella was silent. She would never feel anything but heartsick at being brought to this hostile land.

She knew some women had stolen with one purpose in mind: to join lovers and husbands already transported, and these few were cheerful at the prospect of being reunited with their menfolk.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a shout. "That there's The Rocks." The first mate jerked his head towards the cottages and shacks sprawled on the hillside. "If any of you ladies is interested in working in the public houses and rum taverns, that's where you should head," he said, amid coarse laughter from his mates.

"Gawd, let's 'ope we've seen the last of pubs, eh?" Gracie said as Isabella huddled closer to her side. Gracie had made no secret of being a whore in London. To most of the women it had been the only means of supporting themselves and families apart from thieving. Isabella shuddered and Gracie patted her hand. "You'll have no need to end up over there, you wait and see."

"I hope to God I don't, Gracie." There had been a period back there in Stepney when she had expected to spend the rest of her days as a whore. Most of the other young girls in that slum had resorted to selling their bodies to save themselves from starvation.

But for good or evil, that scum of a gentleman had put paid to that expectation.

She grimaced as Gracie went on blithely, "I saw it in me tea leaves, you're gonna make yer fortune 'ere in the colony." She chuckled at Isabella's sceptical look.

"Oh Gracie, what am I going to do without you?" Isabella shook her head. The thought of their impending separation made her feel sick.

"You'll do a treat, ducks, yes you will."

"I only wish I was as certain," Isabella muttered. She'd been lucky to end up with Gracie when the prisoners had been split into mess groups at the start of the voyage. Gracie had been her protector and her mentor. Not even a childhood spent foraging for sustenance in Stepney, or the violence during her stay in prison, had prepared her for the hardness and cruelty of some of the thieving harlots on the prison ship. Gracie had held Isabella's hand when they'd peered through the scuttle holes to get their last despairing glimpse of London, knowing they'd never see it again.

Gracie now tapped Isabella beneath the chin and grinned again,

showing the many gaps in her teeth. "You'll get a good master, don't fret, then all your troubles will be over."

Isabella had a feeling her troubles would never be over.

Dazedly she watched as the boat dropped off the last woman and turned to head back to the ship for the next load of human cargo. The haze caused by the swirling dust gave the scene a sense of unreality. Sweat seemed to seep from every pore in Isabella's skin, soaking her ragged clothing, but she'd grown used to almost every form of human discomfort. What was a bit of sweat? The wind raced across the wharf, the flying dust stinging her cheeks, bare arms, and ankles.

The harbour was a cauldron of activity. Longboats ferried cargo to and from the dozen or so ships bobbing at anchor in the cove, most bound for exotic and oriental ports. At first sight of it the startling scenery had lifted the convicts' flagged spirits after weeks of endless ocean, but that first sense of exhilaration had soon dispelled.

Gracie nudged her. "Buck up deary. 'ere's the nobs."

Isabella tried to stop her fingers shaking as she wiped at her dry, cracked lips. Soldiers, lined up and armed, stared at the unkempt women as if they were no better than the rats that had swarmed below decks.

"Stand to one side," one of the soldiers ordered and another waved his truncheon.

"What do they think we are, a load of stupid sheep?" Isabella moaned.

"Ah well, we should be used to it by now." Gracie sighed as they all moved to where they'd been directed.

"They're looking at us as if we're creatures on display at the fair. You'd think they've never seen a female con before!"

There were men everywhere, not just the soldiers. They lurked around corners and on rooftops, treating the arrival of a shipload of women as an unusual spectacle.

"'Tis a fact that we've been brought here because they have a shortage of women in the colony, Bella. I s'pose that lot's waiting to find out which of us they're gonna own, eh?" Gracie jerked her head towards a motley group of men standing openly surveying them, eyes gleaming.

It took some time to bring all the prisoners to shore. Isabella was close to fainting with the heat before the final boatload was set down.

At a signal from one of the officials a gentleman came out of a building. Moving with stiff precision to the centre of the dockyard, he

stopped, then wiped his face on a white kerchief as he cast his eyes along the row of women. Unsmiling, he announced, "On behalf of Governor Macquarie I welcome you to New South Wales."

"God bless me, if he don't sound like 'e's really glad to see us who've come from the other side of the world at the King's pleasure." Gracie chuckled. "Nice of Governor Macquarie to send one of 'is codgers to make sure we're all 'appy to be 'ere."

"Yes, happy as larks!" Isabella retorted in a sharp whisper.

"As you know," the man went on, "you have been allocated quarters or assigned masters. These good men," he gave the officials a stiff smile, "have spent many hours taking your particulars to ensure that everyone goes to an appropriate place of employment. You will show your allegiance to these masters. If you work hard to prove you're of some worth to the new colony you will earn your freedom as many others have before you." Obviously bored, he ran his eyes along the row of sweltering women. "Many of you will be in far better positions than you would ever have hoped to attain in England." He turned and strode back into the building.

Isabella blew upwards in an effort to cool herself. She'd only taken in half of what that man had said. She was a prisoner, for all his fancy words. Still, in the long run, better to work here, hopefully in some nob's kitchen, than to rot in a prison back home. Or face the hangman's noose.

Home! It was so far away and so far removed from where she stood now, that it seemed as if the years before she'd been arrested had been lived by another person. But for all their poverty she had always known what it was to be a part of a close, loving family. Oh how she missed her ma, and her brothers and sisters.

Isabella ignored the leering looks they received from men scurrying to off-load cargo. Her legs felt as if they would give out on her at any moment. Her bad foot with its crooked toes was beginning to ache fiercely and she began to sway.

At last they were herded to where a stern government clerk sat at a table, a ledger in front of him and a pen in his hand.

Gracie poked Isabella in the back. "I 'ope I get a strong 'ansome master," she said with a chuckle. "Like that one with the gold 'air over there. Look at 'im. Lord, 'e'd do me fine. 'e's been staring 'ard at us since we came ashore. Stands out from the other lot like a boil on yer nose, don't 'e? Rather a dandy, I don't mind saying so. I'll warm 'is bed any time 'e likes."

"Can't say I noticed him," Isabella lied.

"Oh no, suddenly you're blind, eh?"

"One member of the gentry's the same as the other. They can all rot in hell!" Isabella shuddered. She detested them all, with their fine clothes, finicky manners, and hearts as cold as stone.

"You may sit on the ground, ladies." The officer in charge gave the order then smirked as he marched away.

"Cripes, why didn't they tell us that before!" Gracie sank with a huge sigh onto her well-padded bottom. The others followed her.

Tiger Carstairs removed his hat, then ran his fingers through his sweat-dampened hair. Smiling grimly he pushed the hat back on as he turned his back on the bedraggled lines of women.

What a bunch! They didn't get any better. Still, one female had caught his eye. She was a bit short on flesh to cover her bones, but there was a light of defiance in her eyes that the dreadful journey with all its degradation hadn't snuffed. She had stared right at him from eyes as green as the sea as she'd limped past, her spine straight as a broomstick. He liked that.

Yes, she'd do perfectly.

She was young, if not very hearty, but Thelma had told him to keep his eye out for one who didn't look as if she'd be off in a flash with any man who showed up at the back door. This one hated men, if that glower she'd given him was anything to go by. So blatant was her scorn he'd fully expected her to spit in someone's eye. The sunshine had picked up glints in hair that would probably be reddish-brown after a good washing. But the wench had really taken his fancy, stirred some deep emotion in him. It was an unnerving sensation, peculiar in its uniqueness.

"Ho, Tiger Carstairs, after a new woman to warm your bed?" called one of the other men who'd come to inspect the new arrivals.

Tiger eyed the man coldly. Half of these poor dregs of humanity would end up as bed-warmers for this lot. Still and all, most of the females who had landed today had whored in London and on the journey over, so the new life in the colony would hold no surprises for them.

"No, Mackenzie. Believe it or not, some of us are merely looking for

women capable of keeping our homes clean and our stomachs full." Tiger looked away, watching the hustle and bustle of unloading.

Mackenzie's laughter was coarse as he walked away. Probably rum soaked as usual. Tiger sauntered over to the table where Gregson sat with his list of assignments.

"The wench there with the cropped red hair, who's to take her?" he asked indolently. "I'd like her."

"Have to wait your turn, Carstairs. She's been assigned. I have your woman already noted. Let me see..." Gregson ran a finger down his list, then said, "Ah, yes, you have been allocated one Moira Paine."

"I don't want one Moira Paine unless it's that wench." Tiger pointed to the red-haired girl. She was staring at her feet, looking for all the world as if she was unaware of what was going on around her. Or had cut herself off from it all.

Gregson peered along the line to the woman in question. "What would you want with a scrawny wench like that, eh?" He shrugged. "Mind you, she has the makings of a beauty, I suppose."

"I care not for looks, old chap." Tiger knew he lied. "My kitchen woman needs a girl to help. This one looks capable."

"Oh aye." Gregson chuckled. "She does look capable enough." He leered, and Tiger hid a grimace of disgust. These men all had one thought in mind where women were concerned, and that was having them on their backs with their legs spread. "Hold on, old man, we're about to start allocating now."

Tiger eyed Gregson with annoyance. With a look along the line he saw that the wench in question still stared at her feet. His heart gave a strange lurch, unsettling him.

"Ah, thank the Lord, I'm gasping for a drink," Gracie said when some women came along the line with water jugs. "You cons?" she asked the one who offered her a mug.

"Yea, all of us." The woman grinned.

"Ow d'ya find it 'ere?"

"It's a blooming laugh a minute ain't it?" She showed her toothless gums as she threw her head back in a laugh. "Mind yer Ps and Qs and yer'll find it ain't half bad," she advised, before going on down the line.

"Not bad!" Gracie blew a raspberry, then wiped her mouth with the

back of a hand. "Gawd, but it's like a blooming oven out 'ere, ain't it?" She wiped the hem of her filthy skirt across her face, making streaks through the grime.

Isabella sighed wearily. Her bad foot ached, her stomach was twisted in knots, her hair was lousy and she stank like a pile of animal droppings. The seasickness that had racked her during the long months at sea was still with her, and the ground seemed to be going up and down.

Now the fear that had plagued her since she'd been herded onto the ship so many months ago rose up to stifle her. Just what sort of master would she get? She knew she was as strong as any woman here, but they would take one look at her crippled foot and discard her as a domestic help. She'd get picked as some man's whore for certain, that was all these high falutin' nob's sought. That was how she'd got herself into this mess in the first place. By taking a knife to one of them who'd thought it was his God-given right to lay his white pampered hands on her.

With a small sob, her right palm went to her stomach. The babe had lain there such a short while. Although she had loathed the thought of the nob's spawn resting in her womb, when the growing babe had been torn from her she had mourned its loss. It hadn't been the babe's fault; and perhaps it had been better off not coming into this cruel world.

One of the babies born on board began to whine and Isabella stared at its screwed-up face. Poor mite! Its mother, a doxie who'd worked the streets of Islington, put the child to her sagging breast.

Heartsick and afraid of what the future held, Isabella put her face on her bent knees and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

Ignoring the others as they tossed ribald jokes about the armed soldiers back and forth, Isabella tidied her hair as best she could with her fingers. How she longed for a bath; she'd give her right arm to be able to sink herself into a tub of warm fresh clear water instead of salt water.

"All right, enough primping," a guard said, smirking as he poked her on the shoulder. "Up you get and go over to the table when your name's called. No hustling, an' behave yourselves. You never know, the guvner his self may pick you." One of his comrades gave him a dig in the ribs and they both chortled.

Isabella let the contempt she felt for him show as she picked up her bundle and slowly rose. If she didn't know she would get clapped in irons she'd spit in his ugly pig's eyes.

The women shuffled about, and the baby began to bawl loudly. Isabella spotted Dougal among the crewmen who had just unloaded some cargo from one of the longboats. Her friend was frowning and she sent him a wan smile. He looked about, then waved discreetly, mouthing, "You all right?"

Isabella nodded warily. Would she ever be all right again? Had she ever been all right in her whole life? At nineteen she sometimes felt as if she'd lived a hundred years; most of them with an empty stomach, and heavy heart.

The woman next to her wiped a hand over her runny nose and sniffed, swearing obscenely beneath her breath as the man behind the table stood up.

"First I will call the names of the women going to Parramatta to be assigned to masters in that district," he shouted. "These females will form an orderly line over here." He waved a hand carelessly. "You will then be escorted to the master attendant's boat for the short trip upriver."

The troublemaker, Marjorie, was among the thirty or so whose names he called. As constables led them off Marjorie lifted her skirts, showing her bare bottom to the soldiers. A couple of the other women did the same. One or two of the rowdier women made catcalls and began singing a bawdy song.

The official ignored them and the boisterous calls they'd brought on.

Nodding to the group of male onlookers, he called, "Now then, Isabella O'Shea."

Isabella jumped. "Isabella O'Shea, come forward now!"

Gracie gave her a soft nudge and mumbled a word of encouragement. Gripping a fold of her skirt in a fist, her head held high so that no one would guess at her nervousness, Isabella stepped over to the table.

"That's me." Her clear voice showed no sign of her inner turmoil.

"Ah yes, I see you're Irish born," he read from his ledger. "You were tried on the twenty-third of May eighteen seventeen. Attempted murder!" He sneered, his slash of a mouth twisting. "Your sentence is seven years. My God, His Lordship must have been feeling soft that day."

Isabella pressed her lips together.

"No previous convictions. Must have been the reason he was so lenient." Giving her lower half a sneering glance he added insolently, "And you have a deformation of the toes of the right foot."

Isabella lifted her chin higher. He made it sound as if she had two heads and a hunchback. "Yes, that's so," she assured him clearly, her shoulders going back until they ached.

"I'll take the useless wench." A lump of a man with a distinct Irish brogue strode over to stand beside Isabella.

She began to shake. He looked as if he'd slept in the same clothes for a year. His beady eyes reminded her of an ugly bird of prey she'd seen once in a book, a vulture, yes that was what it was called. Arms too long for his body flopped at his sides.

"Gawd, girl! You don't want that pile of shit taking you," Gracie called out. "'Ere guv, take a look at me lovely titties! Choose me instead." She pushed her ample breasts forward and leered at the Irishman.

But he wouldn't have noticed Gracie if she threw herself naked into his arms. As if the matter were decided he yanked Isabella towards him, slobbering.

Isabella dug her heels into the ground. No! She screamed inwardly. Sweet heaven! Had she come through the sea journey unscathed only to end up in the bed of this son of the devil?

"Just a minute," a calm level voice ordered.

Malloy turned to face the tall fair-haired man who strolled towards them.

He had yellow-gold eyes, Isabella noticed; eyes the like of which

she'd never seen on any man. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with narrow hips. But her eyes were drawn to his handsome face, with a nose that was straight and elegant, a wide brow, a firm chin.

His strong legs were encased in breeches. He wore knee-high boots and his white shirt, open almost to his waist, showed a V of brown flesh covered with golden hairs. The sun glinted in them, making them sparkle. He seemed to be surrounded by a glowing aura and Isabella shook her head slightly to rid herself of the impression the man was a golden god. There was a vitality and arrogance about him that made every other man in the area fade into insignificance.

"What you want, Tiger Carstairs?" Malloy snarled.

No mistaking where this Tiger had acquired his nickname. With that mane of hair and his eyes, he bore a striking resemblance to a wild animal. At this moment he looked like a lion about to pounce on his prey. Every woman in the line had turned to watch him.

"Now, ain't 'e the finest bit of man flesh you ever laid yer eyes on," the woman now at the front of the line declared loudly, sashaying her hips and whistling through her brown teeth.

"Keep yer filthy maulers off him, Gert," Gracie hissed. Isabella turned in time to see Gracie giving Gert a jab in the ribs with her elbow. "I have a feeling 'e's not the sort to cavort with strumpets such as you, yer old faggot!"

"Aw! A girl can dream," Gert sighed, clutching at the neck of her shift until her breasts almost popped out of the torn bodice.

"I have a letter from the Governor's office that states I have the right to select a female of my choice from this shipment, Malloy," Tiger Carstairs stated calmly. "So take your filthy mitts off the girl. I saw her first."

Astonished, Isabella stared at him. The boldness in his eyes as he looked her over was startling.

"I 'ave a letter from the Guvner's office," Malloy mimicked, pulling his mud-spattered trousers up with a jerk. "Sod off Carstairs, an' take your sodding letter with you!"

Isabella also glared at this Tiger. He looked as if he thought he owned the very ground beneath his feet. Another Englishman making claims on her! Another of the arrogant aristocracy! He must be a nob if he was a friend of the Governor.

Isabella cringed inside. Every Englishman was the devil's spawn. Most of the women in the line were now calling out their willingness to

go with him. They could take her place as far as she was concerned. The arrogant golden-haired man ignored all the offers and catcalls as if he hadn't heard them, continuing to appraise Isabella, making her feel like a fattened calf at the market.

"The wench comes with me," the ugly Irishman claimed, his slash of a mouth twisting in a parody of a grin.

Despite the heat Isabella shivered as he wiped a drop of spittle from his chin with a filthy hand whose nails were bitten to the quick. Dirt was ingrained into his flesh. She doubted he'd washed in months, perhaps years.

"I beg to differ, Malloy. She comes with me," the tall Englishman said.

"Now, just a minute both of you!" the official interrupted. "The lass has been assigned to work in the kitchens of Mr Tonkins. It's not up to either of you to decide on the matter." With a glance at Tiger Carstairs he put up a hand and called, "Mr Tonkins, come and collect your charge."

Isabella's knees went weak with relief when a small rotund man came forward, a cautious look on his kindly ruddy face. Obviously not of the gentry, he looked to be a tradesman of some sort, his homespun clothes plain, his boots unpolished.

But her relief was short-lived when he said diffidently, "I have no problem with exchanging my assignee with Tiger's." He gave the tall man a wary glance. "I simply want a young woman to assist my Emily with her household chores. It matters little who I get as long as she's young and able." Isabella could have screamed her outrage. With a pleading glance at him she silently begged this Mr Tonkins to change his mind.

But Gregson said, "Very well. That's settled," and she knew her fate was set. With a long-suffering sigh the official drew a line across the page, altering names. "If you're willing to change, and Mr Carstairs has a letter from the Governor's office, it's a matter between you. Moira Paine, come forward. You go with Mr Tonkins."

"But, but . . ." The man named Malloy pressed his palms on the table. His face was turning purple and more spittle flew from his mouth.

Gregson, the government man, took a kerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his face. "For goodness sake go over there and await your turn, Malloy. Now!" he ordered when the Irishman dallied, a stubborn look in his watery eyes.

The giant called Tiger took Isabella's arm and began to lead her away. Amused, the guards shouted obscene remarks. He ignored them.

"Take care girl," Gracie called.

Isabella sent a smile tinged with nervousness and terror over a shoulder as she was steered across the wharf. Helpless despair filled her. This Tiger Carstairs who now owned her body and soul led her silently along narrow alleys. Raucous cries of street traders and mixed smells of cooking food and animal droppings reminded her vaguely of the back streets of Stepney.

Men and women who looked the worse for drink sprawled on high steps in front of shops displaying red and white poles by their doors. Isabella had seen the likes back home and knew exactly what trade these shops plied. For a moment she considered breaking free and rushing over to one of them for sanctuary. Perhaps whoring for seamen was a better option than being this English gent's property.

At the end of a narrow street they went up some steep steps. When he saw that with her limp she couldn't mount as easily as he, Tiger Carstairs slowed his pace without letting go of her arm. At the top he went up to one of the assorted wagons secured there, and stopped, giving Isabella a furious glance when she fidgeted.

"Be still, woman!" he ordered, shaking her none too gently.

"I'd just as soon have gone with that Mr Tonkins," she told him haughtily, trying to get free.

"You have no say in who you go with. Tonkins now has his woman and is quite happy. Would you rather have gone with the Irishman? Yes?" he asked when she remained mute. "Perhaps I should have let him take you. Do you know what the likes of Malloy would do with you, hmm? Well, let me tell you, he'd use your scrawny body until it was fit for naught but feeding the sharks out in the cove. The last woman who went with him is now dead and buried, and probably grateful to be there, instead of being used by him."

"I might have preferred going with him," Isabella lied. "Anything would be better than being the chattel of an English pig."

His heavy golden brows drew together. "So, 'tis a pig I am is it? If you think I'm a swine then let me tell you about Malloy, wench. He's a debaucher of the worst kind. Why else do you think he wanted a skinny little wench like you? Especially one who walks with a limp and who doesn't have the strength to lift a kettle, by the looks of her." His strange golden eyes skimmed her from head to toe in open scorn.

"Then why did you pick me if you think I'm such a poor choice?"

"Heaven knows. I must be mad. I should have left you to Tonkins, or let Malloy have his way. All right. You win."

He curved his fingers about her upper arm and made to drag her back the way they'd come. "Right, let's go back. I've now lost my original woman to Tonkins, but I'm sure if Malloy hasn't made his choice yet he'll be more than willing to accept you. I'll get whatever is left. You can have the pleasure of warming that old lecher's bed until you lose every scrap of self-respect, until your body has been reduced to a snivelling wreck or you die of the pox. Come on, then, let's go," he said when she stood firm, her feet planted in the dust. "Damned if I have the time for a cripple with a foul temper anyway."

Isabella put a hand to her throat. What a beast! But then what was she to expect from an Englishman! Especially one who looked as if he'd never done a hard day's work in his life.

Tiger watched the emotions cross her face; an expressive face, with large eyes that sparkled with such animosity he could practically feel it touching him. She had a fading bruise on her chin, and shadows beneath eyes that reminded him of the sea on a fine day. Her hair, which had been chopped short with a blunt knife by the looks of it, stuck out like a nest of rats' tails.

Why in blazes was he bothering? Deep down he knew the answer to that, but it was something he wasn't willing to confront at this moment; probably never would.

Tiger dropped her arm and turned his back on her, thrusting his hands in the pockets of his breeches. He began to whistle.

"All right. I'll come with you," she said. "But only on one condition."

A choked laugh burst from his lips. He turned and gave her a mocking stare. "You're a bloody convict, woman! You have no rights whatsoever. You make no conditions."

Now wasn't the time to let this man see how nervous she was. "I'll come with you. But . . . could my friend Dougal come to work for you too?"

There, she'd said it, even though her voice wobbled. Raising her chin in a show of bravado she forced her shoulders back. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, her ma had always told them. The worst he could do was say no, or beat her. And one more bashing would make little difference.

"Dougal's very strong and tough as old boots. He knows all there is to know about animals, especially sheep. I noticed there seems to be a lot of those witless creatures yonder on the hills." She turned her head in the general direction of where Dougal had pointed out the sheep he'd spotted from the ship's rail.

A square-tipped finger was jabbed at her nose and she took a step back. "I don't believe this! You've got the nerve of the devil, d'you know that? You've just stepped off a convict ship. Just who the bloody hell do you think you are?"

Isabella could have sworn she saw amusement in those strange eyes of his. How dare he laugh at her!

"I'm as good as any English scum!" she spat, then put a hand over her mouth, expecting a slap for her insolence.

But he drawled, "So 'tis scum I am is it? You don't know the meaning of the word if you think that's what I am, little biddy." He stared at her, long and hard, his face so near that Isabella shivered and she shrank back from the mocking glint in his eyes. Then, rubbing his jaw, he stunned her by agreeing, "All right, what's his name, this lover of yours that you can't bear to be parted from?"

Isabella swallowed, her eyes widening in amazement. Dougal had never been her lover; never would be. He was just a dear friend. But best not let this man know that.

Dougal had successfully shielded her from the sickening and persistent advances of some of the crew. It was taken for granted that once at sea the female prisoners were the officers' for the taking, but Dougal, thank the Lord, had established early on that Isabella was his woman, so keeping them at bay. It had been harder to convince some of the crew members, and she knew he had fought the largest and meanest man on board, and won, to keep the others clear of her.

Dougal was not very tall, but his well-muscled body enabled him to hold up his own in a fight. Isabella dreaded to think what her fate could have been without him and Gracie to champion her. But gratitude and friendship was all she felt for Dougal.

"Jackson. His name's Dougal Jackson. You won't be sorry if you take him on, I know you won't. He's a hard worker, and he can take care of himself as well as any man. He used to be a fist fighter in London."

A glow of hope slowly began to fill Isabella. Perhaps everything would work out just fine as Gracie had predicted. At least this Englishman was listening to her. And that was something she'd never

expected.

"English eh? So, how come he isn't classed as a pig alongside all us Englishmen?" Now she was certain he was laughing at her. At least while he was amused he wasn't contemplating taking his whip to her for speaking out of turn.

"Dougal's Scottish." She sniffed. "He worked his way over on the ship. He's after starting out afresh and that was the only way he could get here. He said he's going to look for work as a shepherd. Do you have sheep?"

"Aye, I have plenty of the creatures." He nodded, his eyes narrowed on her as if deep in thought.

A grey horse with a rounded belly and glossy coat stood patiently between the shafts of the four-wheeled wagon. Tiger Carstairs stroked a hand down its sleek neck, thinking. Isabella held her breath.

Then he said, "Stay here." He jabbed a finger beneath her nose again, ordering, "Keep out of trouble. I'll go and see what I can do about your lover."

Without further ado he strode off down the path they'd just walked, his boots kicking up dust. Very big and arrogant, he held his shoulders straight and proud. Typical English gentry; walked as if he owned the world and all in it. Well, truth was he owned her now. Biting her lip Isabella stroked the velvet nose of the horse. It blew a soft breath on her face.

How strange to be standing here free as a bird with no jailers or crew watching over her. For a moment she felt odd; like a pedlar's monkey she'd once seen. It had become so used to being caged or chained that when it had accidentally gained its freedom one day it had just stayed by its cage shivering and chattering, awaiting its fate. It had received a clip round the ear when the pedlar had returned.

Some children were scampering about nearby and one of them stopped to stare at her. A woman dressed in a severe grey frock with a high collar and starched apron, obviously the girl's nurse, pulled her away sharply, glaring at Isabella as if she was worth nothing.

Isabella poked her tongue out at the woman's back. The tart was probably no better than she was; a con. Now, how good would that be, to end up being a nanny or a governess to some wealthy nob's children. She sighed; another foolish dream. Who would employ a chit of a girl from the slums of Stepney to teach their offspring?

The children were full of beans, laughing carelessly. Even their faces

looked different from the half-starved urchins populating the streets of London. These healthy, strong-limbed children were happy. Isabella guessed their exuberance was due to the confidence of not having to worry where their next meal was coming from. They doubtless wouldn't know what it was to steal to get food in their bellies.

Her attention was caught by a flock of birds, some sort of parrots. Noisily they argued over perches in a nearby tree. Their plumage was a vivid green and several shades of blue, the brightest colours she'd ever seen. The tree was strange, its branches spread wide and high, its trunk shedding its bark. There was a stark sort of beauty in its gangly shape; quite unlike the oak, poplars, and elms of England.

Taking a few deep breaths Isabella turned slowly, her face to the sun, feeling slightly lightheaded. What heaven after the confining horror of the ship! This English gent who'd gone to try and fetch Dougal couldn't be all bad to have agreed to her demand.

Hold on, Bella, she cautioned. Don't go getting all soppy at this late stage. He's an Englishman. No doubt he'll have you warming his bed in short time. Likely he'll want Dougal there too. She'd heard plenty of tales on board about the loathsome acts some of the gentry tried to force the maids and lads in their service to perform for them. Of course! That was probably why he'd agreed so readily to fetch Dougal.

A thought hit her then: he had left her here alone. She didn't have to dally like that stupid monkey. What was there to stop her making off? Glancing about she prepared to make a run for it.

But then she chided herself. Don't be a fool, Bella. Where would you go, and what would you do? The crew had told tales of the wild endless jungle beyond the town and how a person could die of thirst in the desert that went on forever beyond the limits of the colony. Of course she could lose herself in the maze of streets here on this hill but there was little doubt what life would have in store for her if she did. No doubt her English master would delight in dishing out his punishment once he found her; which she was positive he would, with his connections to the Governor.

Might as well wait and see if the Englishman kept his word and brought Dougal back. At least Dougal would watch out for her. She and Dougal could run off together once they had the lie of the land worked out. She'd have more chance of survival with her faithful friend beside her.

A row of filthy prisoners shuffled by in a line, their odd clothing

bearing a pattern of arrows. Their ankle shackles clanked and Isabella shuddered when she caught sight of raw and festering skin beneath the fetters. A few of them called out obscenely to her and the guard in charge of them wielded his weapon and shouted an order to keep moving.

Isabella swallowed as she watched until they were out of sight. Then she looked down at her own legs. At least she wasn't shackled like those poor wretches. And not locked up in some filthy cell as she'd been for months back home. Shuddering, she brushed a hand over her eyes. Nightmares still haunted her of that cell and her fellow inmates. Once the sun set her fears came back to torment her, and probably always would. The stink, the heat, then the intense cold; the fear when she'd begun to bleed and the woman beside her had yelled for the guard who had leered at her blood-soaked skirts. If not for a kindly nun who came to offer comfort to the women awaiting transportation she would be dead now.

The heat made her sleepy. She yawned. They'd been up since the crack of dawn staring anxiously at the shore, she and Gracie whispering their hopes and fears of what would happen to them in this godawful colony the sailors had painted such horrendous pictures about. So far it hadn't turned out anywhere near as terrible as they'd expected. What was Gracie doing now, Isabella wondered? Had she fared any better or worse?

There was a flap at the back of the wagon that could be let down, but it was much too high for her to climb up there so, after giving it a bit of thought, she clambered up the front using one of the smaller wheels. She sat on the bench. All at once she felt sick, weary, and scared out of her wits. Supposing this Tiger Carstairs was as evil as most of the other gentry she'd ever come in contact with.

Twisting her fingers together to stop their trembling she looked straight ahead, ignoring the ribald shouts from a group of marines ambling by. They were obviously on their way to a tavern she could see on a corner of one of the streets nearby, a din emanating from inside its smoky depths.

A lot of time seemed to pass. Others from the prison ship came up the hill and were driven away by their new owners. Some gave her strange looks when they saw she still sat there, alone. Gracie wasn't among them and she worried over her friend.

When one of the other members of their mess came along with a

stern-looking man wearing a reverend's collar Isabella called, "Did you see what happened to Gracie, Ethel?"

"The old devil walked away with her new master. I think he's a nob," Ethel shouted back before being hustled onto a cart.

Eventually just the one wagon remained.

Isabella rested an arm on the iron rail at the back of the seat and put her head on it. Despite all the hustle and bustle going on around her, her eyelids began to droop.

CHAPTER THREE

"Bella!"

Isabella opened her eyes with a jerk to find she'd slumped down onto the wooden bench of the wagon. Sitting upright, she felt dizzy with relief when she saw Dougal.

The Scot, one of the few people in this world she trusted, walked at the side of her new owner, waving his brawny arms above his head and grinning from ear to ear.

The contrast between the two men was striking – one so dark and plain, the other so fair and handsome. Waving, Isabella stood up unsteadily.

"Oh Dougal! Is it really you?" It was too good to be true. The Englishman had actually kept his word.

"Yes, it's really me." As he reached the side of the wagon Dougal beamed up at her, his face red. "Isn't it grand, Bella. Mr Carstairs here persuaded the Captain to let me go. I'm gonna work for him too. So the pair of us can be together." His eyes were filled with innocent awe as he turned to the taller man.

"Yes, Dougal, just grand." Isabella cast a quick glance at the Englishman. His even white teeth were showing in a mocking smile.

"Don't you think you owe me a word of gratitude... What is it? Isabella, or shall I call you Bella?"

"Seeing as I'm your property I'd say you can call me what you like." Isabella folded her arms across her chest. All right, so he'd brought her friend for her, but she wasn't about to bow and scrape to him. Besides, there had to be a selfish reason for his seemingly generous act; no Englishman would put himself out for another's benefit, certainly not for an Irish convict. But she muttered, "Thank you."

Her new owner made a noncommittal sound in his throat.

Tiger had met with a little trouble securing the Scot. The master of the 'Friendship' had put up a short fight, but in the end had lost the battle. The lad had earned his passage over, and was a free man. He only hoped his right-hand man Ginger appreciated a shepherd to help around the place. The boy looked to be well able to handle heavy work, and there was always plenty to do about the farm.

"How old are you, Dougal?" he asked, deciding to ignore the little chit. She would come round or he would send her packing. Once she heard tales of the women's factory at Parramatta she would treat him

with a bit more respect. It was Thelma who would decide in the long run whether she stayed or went. His housekeeper needed a helpmate, not a belligerent shirker.

"Nineteen, sir." The lad touched his forelock and Tiger shook his head when the wench scowled at him, obviously thinking Dougal shouldn't show subservience to an Englishman. "Same as Bella here." He gave the little tartar a fond smile. Good God, the boy was besotted.

"Is that so? I wouldn't have thought her to be older than twelve or thirteen by her actions. Perhaps she'll look more of a woman when she's got a bit more flesh on her bones." Tiger grinned at the scowl on her face, resisting an urge to test her plumpness, or lack of it, by pinching her bottom. He was enjoying himself. She brought out the devil in him. "Up you get, Dougal. Let's get home. Can you drive a rig, lad?"

"Oh yes, sir, I can do anything I set me mind to." Dougal was grinning like a boy who'd just been handed a gift as he climbed onto the front of the wagon, releasing the reins from where they'd been tied around the brake handle.

"Get over the back, girl," Tiger ordered, climbing up beside Isabella. "You'll be more comfortable back there instead of rattling away up the front here." In one swift movement he circled her waist with his strong hands and deposited her in the well of the wagon.

Isabella plopped herself onto a sack of grain, her cheeks flaming and her insides fluttering. Refusing to look at him she stared instead at the tree where the birds were still squawking. His hands had felt like a brand, burning her even through her clothes, and her cheek still tingled where he'd pressed it against the rough material of his sweat-dampened shirt. He had a smell about him that was like no other; somehow all man, emphasising his masculinity and strength.

"Like I said, a bag of bones," the arrogant swine scoffed. "Thelma will have her work cut out filling you up and out. I hope you're not consumptive. Are you?" he queried, giving her a swift once-over before joining her in the back and seating himself on another bulging sack.

His legs were so long that even when she tucked her own beneath her Isabella still had to hold herself erect and stiff to stop her knees from hitting his. "No I am not. Skinny I may be, and who wouldn't after eating the pigs leavings we got on the ship, but I'm as fit as that horse there."

She glared at him and shifted uncomfortably. Why did she have the distinct impression he was stretching his legs out on purpose to intimidate her with his height?

"Aye," Tiger muttered. Lord, what had he gotten himself into with this tart bundle! The lad looked strong enough; he'd be useful. Now he'd seen the two of them together it was clear they had never been lovers; probably never even thought about it. Well, perhaps the lad had thought about it, but the girl looked on him with nothing other than friendship in her eyes. The lad was awkward and shy about her, and clearly worshipped her. Poor fool!

"This area around the wharf has a bad reputation. I recommend you keep clear of it. This district is full of grog shops, gambling dens and brothels," Tiger told them as the wagon rolled and creaked away from the noisy streets of the waterfront. "For many men torn away from homes and families rum is their only diversion. Then there are the whalers and other seamen who arrive with their pockets full of money after several months at sea."

"It stinks worse than the ship on a hot day!" Isabella pinched her nose between a finger and thumb.

Tiger laughed. "Aye. 'Tis said the stench is carried out to sea on a clear night."

"Have they no fresh water at hand?" Isabella asked as they made their way past a row of tumbledown cottages and a watercart trundled by, drawn by a tired old pony.

"Some are lucky and have a well in their yard, but most rely on the cart."

They came onto a wider road. "This here is our main thoroughfare, George Street. Turn left at Hunter Street, Dougal, 'tis marked. That building on the right down there is the Bank of New South Wales, opened just last year." He pointed to a grand building as they turned the corner into Hunter Street.

"We can go past Hyde Park then straight down Elizabeth Street. Here, put this on, it's blowing a brickfielder today." He handed Isabella a hat similar to the one he wore. "It'll do 'til we get home and Thelma finds you a bonnet."

"Brickfielder?" she asked, setting the hat on her itchy head and holding it tight when a gust of wind nearly whipped it away.

"Aye, 'tis what they call the north-westerlies that send the dust from the brickfields at the back of town to cover us with grime." He brushed at his sleeve where grit had settled.

At the top end of a great stretch of parkland he pointed to another splendid building. "And that is the courthouse. Keep out of trouble and

you'll not end up there in front of the magistrate."

Isabella gave him another glare, which seemed to amuse him. "I have no wish to see another magistrate as long as I live," she said, and his smile vanished.

She craned to look at the cottages, some neatly painted and fenced, with flowers growing in abundance in their gardens. Here and there splendid double storeyed houses stood out from their neighbours.

"They're very grand." She pointed to one where a vine with vibrant orange coloured blossoms trailed over the upper balcony. Somehow she'd expected to see nothing but huts and hovels.

"They are," he agreed. "These houses have taken the place of the slab huts which once housed our convict population. Governor Macquarie has done great work for the growing population in his time here."

Isabella was astounded. He was holding a civil conversation with her as if she was one of his acquaintances instead of a convict. It took some getting used to after the long months of being treated no better than one of the rats scuttling about the ship. It was almost as if he was treating her as an equal. No member of the gentry had ever spoken to her in such a way and it felt very strange.

"I'd like to get acres across the Blue Mountains and settle at Bathurst," he continued as if she knew what he was talking about. "I will soon. Land grants have just been given to ten men, half of them born here and half emancipists. Soon I'll be joining them." He was talking more to himself now, a light of purpose shining from those unusual eyes.

Isabella felt sure he'd have no trouble getting whatever he wanted out of life. He was arrogant and sure enough of himself to achieve whatever he went after.

"Blue Mountains?" she dared to ask. He made them sound like some mystical place. "Are they really blue?"

"Aye, sort of." He grinned, further astonishing her. "'Tis the haze lingering over them that caused men to call them that. They are over yonder, west of here." He jabbed a finger over his shoulder.

They went on in silence and soon left the town behind. The spaces between houses grew more distant. Cattle and sheep grazed in the large unfenced areas. They were going out to the desert the crew had warned them about. Isabella began to feel frightened again; she'd been lulled into a false sense of security by his chat. Now they were going into the

unknown, where all sorts of odd creatures lived, and escaped murderers and robbers roamed, along with the strange black men who'd inhabited this land long before the white men had come here.

Isabella had only known the squalid confined streets of the slums where she'd lived, but from the ship as it had gone around the shores of England she'd seen little patches of land divided by stone walls and hedgerows. Everything here was so much bigger, and so much browner. There was an unearthly quiet out here that sent shivers up her back, and always the wind blew, sending dust flying and clumps of grass and leaves whirling about.

"My place is about eight miles out of town, on the way to Botany Bay," her owner said, and Isabella jumped. He was doing it again; acting as if she knew what he was talking about.

"Botany Bay?"

"Aye."

"I hate the sea. I never wish to see it again."

"I can understand that. I'm a landlubber too. I felt the same after all those months at sea." Isabella felt like shouting that at least he hadn't had to spend all those months cooped up below decks in cramped, stinking quarters with a load of thieves and whores. "We don't live near the sea, so there's naught to fear, you'll not see it again unless you go back to the wharf."

"Thank the Lord." She pointed to a cluster of weird looking grasses that caught her eye. Each had a single stem sticking out of the top like a spear. "Those plants are very odd."

"Aye, the plants you'll see here are like none you've ever come across before. Those trees over there are blackwoods, those eucalyptus, those wattles." He pointed to each as they passed.

Isabella began to feel very sleepy and her eyelids drifted down. She blinked a few times, but in the end couldn't fight the drowsiness.

Tiger watched her as she dozed. What an obstinate little chit she was. Even though obviously bone-weary she looked as if she was fighting sleep, still clutching the hat even as her head lolled. Every now and then she gave a startled sigh as they went over a rut in the road. Just the sight of him annoyed her no end. What had some obscure member of the English gentry done to make her hate them so?

"Turn in here, Dougal," he ordered, and she opened her eyes with a jerk. Tiger hid a grin as she straightened the grubby rags about her knees like a prim madam at a tea party.

Although Dougal had been handling the reins efficiently until now, he made such a hard go of manoeuvring the wagon through the narrow gap that it was clear he'd been bluffing. Tiger admired a man, or woman, who had enough gumption to bluff their way out of any situation. Hadn't he done that himself, more times than he could count?

"Stop, I'll open the gate." He vaulted over the side, unhitched the gate, and then waited until the wagon had passed through before climbing aboard again.

The path wound through a stand of the great trees that seemed to be growing everywhere, then as they crested a small hill a house nestled in a small valley came into view.

"My home." There was a distinct note of pride in Tiger's voice.

Isabella hadn't known what to expect, but the house came as a pleasant surprise. There was a wide chimney at the end nearest them. The house was built of bricks, and bigger than she'd expected. She'd thought it might be a dwelling of bark and weatherboard similar to some of the isolated farms they had passed on the road. A verandah along three sides, festooned with a clinging vine, cast shade over the four windows at the front.

A dozen or so chickens scratched about in the dirt outside the fence. The fowls scattered as two black and white dogs came galloping to meet the wagon, their barks insistent and their long tails wagging. Isabella couldn't hold back a smile for the dogs looked so familiar and ordinary when she'd been expecting those peculiar kangaroos they'd seen on the way here.

A few hogs snuffled about in a small yard, and some geese and other large fowl she didn't recognise busily poked about in the dust of another yard.

The ship's crew had been wrong; this was no untamed desert. Isabella said a silent prayer of thanks.

As the wagon rumbled towards a small gate in the fence around the house a woman came out of the front door. Isabella guessed her to be in her forties. Wisps of greying hair peeped from beneath the white mobcap topping a face that, although unsmiling, appeared friendly and inquisitive. She wiped frail-looking hands on the coarse apron swathing her slight frame. She looked as if the strong wind would likely blow her over.

"Called me skinny," Isabella muttered.

The woman lifted a hand in a welcoming wave, and her master

returned it with a small salute as the horse stopped in front of the gate. He jumped down then went round the back and undid the catches that held the flap in place.

"Come on," he ordered, holding out his arms.

Isabella allowed him to lift her to the ground and that same strange sensation shot through her as his hands rested briefly at her waist. Taking the hat from her head he tossed it into the back of the wagon, then turned to address the woman.

"Well, Thelma, here's your helper." Isabella bridled as he ran his eyes insolently over her from head to toe. "You'll have a hard job on your hands, I think. Not only is she a bag of bones, and lousy, she's got a tongue as sharp as one of your kitchen knives. To get her I convinced old Gregson I had certain favours due from the Governor, but I'm beginning to wonder if I should have bothered."

He gave Isabella a look that made the hairs on the back of her neck bristle. Her lips quivered, but she'd be damned if she'd let him see that his cruel words upset her.

Instead she turned her attention to this Thelma. Isabella had presumed it was Carstairs' wife who wanted a new maid, but this woman looked old enough to be his mother. Surely she wasn't married to him? Still, perhaps that was the way things were out here in the colony where women of the upper class were scarce. But this woman didn't have the bearing of the wife of a man of quality.

Looking hard at Isabella she gave Dougal a terse nod, saying, "Aye, an' what about the young man? You didn't say you were after fetching two back with you."

"The lad's a freeman, Thelma; crewed his way over. Seems he's keen to work with the sheep. Isn't that right, Dougal?" He ushered Isabella through the gate.

"Aye, that's right," Dougal agreed, smiling.

"Let's get inside, then. You wait half a minute, Dougal, and I'll show you where to settle the gelding and yourself. This is Isabella, Thelma. Or is it Bella? You never told me which it was to be." He raised his brows.

"My friends call me Bella," Isabella said, feeling confused again.

"Well, I reckon I'll never be termed that, seeing as I'm an Englishman." He gave Thelma an odd look. "But as it's less of a mouthful, Bella it'll be. The lad's Dougal. The girl wanted him along. In fact insisted she would only give us the benefit of her company if her lover came with the package."

Isabella glared at him. Why did he insist on calling Dougal that? The man was definitely intent on embarrassing her. Dougal gasped and her cheeks flamed anew.

The arrogant so-and-so left her standing there with Thelma and went back through the gate, closing it after him, saying, "Come Dougal, I'll show you where to go, and you can wash up. And you'll be needing some better clothes than what you have on. Where's Ginger, Thelma? This lad's a dab hand with sheep, so's I've been told. He'll be a help at lambing time with the ewes."

"He's moving some of the flock. Put one of those fleabraind new men in charge of them it seems and he let them wander. He certainly will appreciate a man who knows his sheep. Come, girl, we'll get you some decent clothes too, and I expect you can't wait to bathe. Your hair looks as if it's forgotten what water feels like." She put a hand on Isabella's back, pushing her gently towards the front door of the cottage.

Isabella returned Dougal's smile with a shaky one of her own as he drove the wagon away.

Inside, the house wasn't what Isabella had expected. The floor of the large kitchen, which ran the width of the house, was of unpolished boards, with mats of woven rushes scattered about. A rectangular table on sturdy carved legs, covered by an embroidered linen cloth set cornerwise, sat beneath two of the four windows overlooking the garden, with six rung-backed chairs tucked round its sides. Pretty curtains flapped in the hot breeze blowing through the windows. Two high-backed chairs with carved armrests flanked the fireplace, where a stove the likes of which Isabella had never seen sat alongside the grate. Commonplace and unmatched crockery lined the dresser filling the wall space between two doors at the back of the room.

"I thought Mr Carstairs was a nob," Isabella blurted, then bit her bottom lip.

Thelma put a hand over her mouth, chuckling. "Bless me girl, what gave you that idea?"

"I thought only the nobs were allowed to pick and choose their slaves. He said he had permission from the Governor's office to take who he liked."

"Slaves? Goodness me, you're not a slave." Crossing her arms over her flat chest Thelma said in a kindly tone, "You're a kitchen help now, that's what you are."

"You don't have to try and be nice to me. I'm a slave, no matter what

you may call me. That English pig picked me out, and I had no say in the matter!"

"Now you listen here, girl!" Thelma wagged a finger, turning such a look of disdain on her that Isabella cringed away as if struck. "Tiger's a gent in every sense of the word. He isn't a nob by birth, but he's the finest man who ever walked this earth! So get that into your head. I don't know what an English gent did to you that made you hate them so, but never – d'you hear me? – never, ever, call him a pig while you're working alongside me, or I'll send you off back with the whores you shared the ship with. An' how would you like to be packed off to the factory at Parramatta, eh?"

Isabella bent her head, more to hide the stubbornness she knew was clear in her eyes than anything else. She'd heard talk about the female factory on the ship; the crew loved to tell tales of the awful fate that awaited the women who went there. English this Tiger Carstairs might be, but Isabella was no fool. If this woman expected her to lick his boots so she could remain here, then that's what she would do. Her pride had been sorely tested in the past months, and she was prepared to grovel if that's what it took to have a clean bed to sleep in and food in her belly.

"Now, Bella my girl, you can sleep in here." Thelma's voice was kindly again as she ushered Isabella across the kitchen. "Dougal will most likely sleep in the stable. Is he really your lover? He don't look like he's even found out what to do with his men's parts yet." Her lips twitched with the makings of a smile.

Suddenly Isabella knew she had no wish to lie to this woman. "No." She pulled a face, a laugh bursting forth. "But Mr Carstairs, he got that idea in his head, and I wasn't about to argue with him. Dougal and me became good friends on the ship. Him and Gracie are the only real friends I ever had. She's a real tough one, is Gracie. I don't know what I'd have done without them two. I was lucky to get Gracie as a messmate. She was in charge of our group of six. It was her idea to cut my hair." Isabella fingered her rat's tails wistfully. Once her hair had fallen to her waist, it had been her ma's pride and joy. "Gracie reckoned it'd be better all round if I looked ugly and like a boy. Those men on the ship look on all the con women as whores, whether they are or not."

"Wise woman, this Gracie. I'll find out where she's gone so's you can see her. Your hair will grow, don't fret. You'll never have to cut it again. As long as Tiger is your master, you'll have nothing or no one to fear. Now, here's your room." Thelma opened a door in the corner and

gestured for Isabella to enter.

The room held a low narrow bed with a small square cupboard beside it. Another embroidered cloth dangled over the edges of the cupboard and a china water jug and bowl sat on it.

"Here's some clean clothes. Good job Tiger didn't come home with someone built like a barge, or they wouldn't have fit, eh?" Thelma glanced over Isabella and chuckled as she lifted a curtain that ran across one corner to reveal pegs knocked into the wall with garments hanging on them.

Perhaps that's why he picked me, Isabella thought, to fit into the clothes he already had waiting here. She could think of no other explanation. It certainly wasn't for her beauty. And once he'd had a taste of her sharp tongue it was a wonder he hadn't let her go with that Malloy. When she thought of how fate had stepped in she felt ill. Someone up there must be watching over her. Tiger Carstairs wasn't so bad, for an Englishman, even though he had a tongue that matched her own in sharpness. This Thelma seemed to think he was some sort of paragon anyway.

"What you got in your bundle then? Did you manage to bring any of your own things with you, girl?" she asked as she eyed Isabella's parcel.

Isabella unwrapped her meagre possessions. "I kept the dress I had on when I went up for trial. It's not much, but at least it's mine." Holding up the threadbare garment she bit her lip as she looked at the sorry rag. It was pathetically thin. The bloodstains had been washed out by one of the nuns.

"They made us wear these." With disgust Isabella touched the skirt of the regulation garment that had been handed to her on boarding the ship. There wasn't much difference between it and her own dress.

"We'll burn those smelly old things then, eh?" Thelma turned her nose up. "There's plenty of water. No need to heat it up, it'll be warm enough coming straight out of the barrel. Come on, I'll help you wash your hair and then fetch you a fresh jug so's you can wash the rest of the grime off yourself. You can throw the dirty water out of the window. There's a bucket there. It'll do for the vegetables. Well, what d'you think?" Crossing her thin arms again she tapped her elbows.

Isabella swallowed the great lump in her throat. "It's just grand," she whispered, fighting to hold back tears. Through the long months at sea she'd feared what lay at journey's end. The worst nightmare had been

someone like Malloy using her body, then discarding her. The best dream had been of being taken into the Governor's residence as a housemaid, or even a scullery skivvy. Never in her wildest dreams did she expect to end up with a room to call her own, and a kindly woman like this to watch over her.

She fought the tears, but they won.

"Now then, stop that." Thelma put an arm about her shoulders and squeezed gently. "No doubt you think you've landed in a pit of hell, but soon you'll come to know that you've fallen on your feet. Tiger's the finest master any of us could have. Was the best day of our lives when he brought me an' Ginger here. Picked us up at the wharf same as you, he did."

"He did? You mean... you're a con?" Isabella sniffed back the tears and wiped a fist across her eyes.

"Ex, deary. Anyway, time to talk later. Get yourself spruced up. Come on, we'll get them rags off, and get you scrubbed."

Isabella smiled. It wasn't exactly the tub she'd dreamed of, but the promised fresh water, and as much of it as she needed, sounded like heaven to her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tiger followed the line of the fence. Ye gods, he'd gone into town to fetch back kitchen help for Thelma and come back with a wench who promised to be more strife than she was worth, and a shepherd who doubtless didn't have a clue where sheep were concerned. Ah well, time would tell if either of them was worth the trouble.

"Hop down, lad. This is the stable," Tiger said when the gelding stopped beside the outbuilding sharing the roofline of the house. "Ginger and Thelma's room is alongside there." He pointed to the window in the back wall of the house. "One of your jobs will be to look after this one." Tiger smoothed a palm over the gelding's neck.

The lad eagerly jumped down and together they went inside the stable. Tiger loved its smell of straw, warm horseflesh and leather. A couple of small birds flew over their heads with a flurry of wings, and out the door.

"Old Satan here is my saddle horse, you'll take care of him too." Tiger went over to the bay whinnying from one of the two stalls, and fondled its nose. "Do you know anything about horses, Dougal?"

"Well, I used to help the rag and bone man." There was something pitiable about the lad's eagerness. "I was about five when me Da took us to England, and I missed the animals. I followed this old hawker about for a while begging him to let me ride his pony. He got fed up with me and sent me packing in the end. The poor old pony was on its last legs anyway." His shrug spoke volumes.

"Right lad, I'll show you how to get the pony out of the rig, then later I'll teach you how to harness up and how to saddle old Satan. One thing I demand, lad, is that you treat the animals with kindness. There's no act of cruelty allowed on my property. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." He nodded twice. "One lesson I've learned is that men may treat their fellow man as if they are worthless, but if you show an animal kindness they'll return it in kind."

"Well said." Tiger slapped him on the back. "We'll get on fine. Now let's get the pony settled."

Once the gelding had been put in its stall and given some grain Tiger showed Dougal where and how to stow the wagon. "You can sleep in here." Tiger pointed to a section of the stable partitioned off from the stall where the gelding was munching happily. "'Tis not the best on

offer, but at least it has a door and is weathertight to keep out the rain. Most nights you'll not want the door shut anyway. After the time on the ship 'tis my belief you'll be wanting to be out in the open as much as possible. Is that right?"

"Aye sir, that's the truth." Dougal grinned.

"There's not room in the house for another." Tiger frowned as he rubbed his nape. "There's just a small room for the girl. Is the wench always so fractious?"

Dougal chewed on the inside of his mouth. "Bella's a fine woman, Mr Carstairs. She's been through hell an' back."

"I dare say. She's had to put up with many a struggle, eh? And there's an Englishman at the back of all her problems, by the sound of it."

The Scot pulled a wry face, shaking his head. "It's a fact, sir, she hates all the gentry. She never told me exactly why, though."

"No, I reckon she's got hurts locked up inside her that will take a while to find their way out. She don't know it yet, Dougal, but her problems are over."

"Thank the Lord." Shuffling his feet Dougal cuffed at his nose awkwardly. "She probably won't do it, sir, so I'd like to thank you for taking us on. You won't ever regret it, I promise."

"That's all I ask." Tiger gripped one of his shoulders. "What made you want to seek a new life in the colony, man?"

Studying his feet, Dougal said, "I just wanted a bit of food in me belly, and reckoned it sounded better over here than back home. An' there was little back there to hold me." His eyes held a wealth of sadness.

"That's what most of us are after. Well, lad, if you work hard around here you'll get a decent meal inside you. Be fair with me, and I'll treat you right. I've got no time for people who don't appreciate what's done for them." Tiger glanced thoughtfully towards the front of the house. That little chit in there had a few lessons to learn along those lines.

"I'll work hard for you, sir. You'll never regret letting me come to work for you."

Tiger grinned. "I hope not. An' you can call me Tiger. Everyone else does. We don't stand on ceremony here. Only the convict hands are expected to show a bit of respect by using my full name."

"Thank you ... Tiger. And this'll do me just fine." The lad rubbed his hands together as he glanced about. "After the filth of the poky little

ship's cabin I shared below decks with a dozen others this is the next best thing to a fine hostelry."

"Ginger'll see about giving you some clean clothes when he comes along shortly. You'll find water in the barrel behind the stable here. We men bathe there. One of your jobs will be to fetch water from the dam when the barrel is empty after weeks of no rain. Wash your hair and body, lad, and once you have the stink of the ship off you, you'll be feeling up to scratch. How did your father come to be in England, by the way?"

"Me Da left Scotland when I was just a little 'un, as I said. He went south looking for work, an' ended up dying of starvation. He gave all the food he found to his family. My three little brothers died of the consumption." Dougal lifted his broad shoulders in a helpless shrug.

"That's a sorry tale, Dougal. And what of your Ma? Did you leave her behind?" Tiger felt so much sympathy for him, knowing the pain of leaving all that was familiar in England.

The Scot looked about furtively, and for a moment Tiger thought he wouldn't answer. But then he blurted, "She went on the streets, didn't she? I hated her for a while, but then I grew up." His mouth turned down at the corners in a small grimace. "'Twas one way to keep herself from dying in the gutter. At least she would have had something to eat most days. I dunno how she ended up. She went off with this bloke about three months after Da died, an' I never saw her again, did I?"

Tiger gave him a small pat on the shoulder. What could he say? No doubt she would be dead of the pox by now. He sighed, then brightened as his right-hand man strode towards them, his unlit clay pipe sticking out of his mouth.

"Ah, here's Ginger now. He's a man of few words, as you'll find out, and happiest working with his sheep and dogs. He's as straight as an arrow in flight. Do right by him and you'll find a friend for life, Dougal. Especially if you care for the sheep." Tiger chuckled.

Ginger was about forty-five as far as Tiger could fathom, and as thin as a man could get without being invisible, but his strength was of the wiry kind that required little sustenance to keep it stoked. He waved his pipe at them, showing no surprise to see Dougal standing there.

"Ginger, we've got ourselves a shepherd," Tiger said, and Ginger nodded once. "Give the lad a shirt, a pair of trousers, and a pair of boots. Then burn the things he has on. We have convicts and men with tickets of leave working on our land, Dougal. They live in quarters yonder and

look after themselves with their own rations. But none are very good shepherds, so Ginger here will appreciate your help. Right, I'll leave you to Ginger."

"Thanks, Mr ...er, Tiger," Dougal called after him.

Tiger gave a nod then strode towards the front of the house, knowing he'd left Dougal in good hands. The lad would do well. But lord knows what the wench inside would turn out like. Only time would tell if he'd made a serious misjudgment.

"Well, Thelma, how's she scrubbed up?" he asked, entering the kitchen and pulling out one of the rung-backed chairs. Straddling it, he rested his forearms along its curved back.

Thelma clicked her tongue. Shaking her head she folded her thin arms across her chest. "Poor mite, she's still in there scrubbing as if water's just been invented. I got rid of the lice from her head, I hope. She'll do."

"Poor mite, is it?" Tiger grunted. "Something tells me I should have left her to go with Malloy. He wanted to take her."

"Malloy! He's the foulest person in the colony, bar none."

"She would have preferred to go with Tonkins, it seems. The wench has a grudge against the gentry." Tiger lifted his brows at Thelma's surprised look. As she opened her mouth to say something the door in the corner opened.

"Ah, there you are, Bella," Thelma said, smiling, as the girl came tentatively into the kitchen. "Come in now, girl, an' we'll start to fatten you up a bit."

"Fatten me up? Am I to be filled out an' sent off to market like a farm beast?"

"Heavens above, you're an ungrateful bundle!" Tiger gave her a reproving look. "Thelma's just wanting to give you a taste of some decent food. We ought to send you packing, and that's a fact. Now, come sit and eat."

She sat, her head bowed, hands folded demurely in her lap.

Tiger didn't trust the meek and subservient attitude at all. Obviously she'd worked out that it would pay her to show some respect. The chit was like a fire waiting to be ignited, she wouldn't know how to be demure. But he'd always been one to play with fire, and taming this shrew should prove amusing.

"I must say you smell sweeter now. Of course the garments don't exactly make you a lady of quality but they're a step up from what you

were wearing." He let his eyes rove over her from her head to her toes in a desultory way that he knew would anger her. Her cheeks flared, and he knew she itched to fling an insult at him. Poor mite, indeed.

"Thank you for these," Isabella muttered as she fingered the coarse woven material of the frock. It reached her ankles and was a bit on the roomy side, but the off white apron Thelma had given her helped to pull it in round the middle. She'd never owned a petticoat in her life, and the soft material of that felt wondrous. The shoes were on the big side too, but they were the only decent foot coverings she'd ever worn. Hopefully her feet would grow into them as her body grew into the dress, and the stockings helped fill up some of the space in them. It was too hot for the hose, but she hadn't been able to resist the novelty of wearing them.

How blissful it was to be clean. She would put up with his taunts for that alone. Tears clogged her throat.

"How did you get the limp, Bella?" her new master asked, and she quickly swallowed the tears.

For a minute Tiger thought she wasn't going to answer. My God, but she held a grudge about something. He'd solve the puzzle or die in the attempt.

"I was fighting for bread," she said softly. "A baker's cart went over a large cobblestone, spilling its load everywhere across the street. We were squabbling over our share of the bread. The baker began to chase us off an' I bumped into a nob's horse. One of its hooves caught me and my toes were broken." Her expression was as flat as her words.

"I see, and because you were so poor you couldn't get a surgeon's care, right?" Tiger asked.

"That's right." She raised defiant eyes and chin. "But what would you know of being so poor that you had to fight for a crust!"

"Tiger knows well enough –" Thelma began.

Tiger lifted a hand. "Hush, Thelma." He gave her a wink and she pulled a face at him, which the wench didn't see, she was busy looking at her hands. "The sharp-tongued termagant wants to see me as a slave-driving member of the upper class. Let's leave her with her own ideas, eh?" He chuckled and the chit gave him a look of such contempt that he was momentarily stunned.

"But she ought to know, Tiger," Thelma insisted as he turned the chair about and sat on it when she put his meal on the table.

"Time enough. Now, eat." Tiger waved his fork. "By the way . . .Bella

... where did you come by the nasty bruise on your chin?"

She touched it with her fingertips. "One of the whores who shared our mess tripped me up. The ratfaced harlot did it on purpose. I hit my face on a post."

"Poor girl!" Thelma clicked her tongue.

"You should have seen her lovely black eye after Gracie had finished with her." Isabella smiled at the memory, and the small movement of her lips sent Tiger's insides into a strange spin. He dragged his eyes away.

Dougal came in with Ginger. "Ah, here comes your lover, and my right-hand man," he said. Her smile disappeared instantly and fresh colour flooded her face.

"Don't call Dougal that!" She scowled at him.

"Oh, I beg your pardon. So, 'tis a secret, is it?" Tiger winked at Thelma as she set a plate of food in front of the girl. Her sour look clearly said she thought he was going too far.

Thelma smiled at Ginger, then gestured for Dougal to sit at the table. "Come, you sit beside Bella," she invited. "You look like you need a decent bit of food inside you too."

"Thank you, ma'am." Dougal gave Isabella a wide smile as he sat, rubbing his palms over his thighs.

Thelma waved a hand. "Bless my soul, I'm Thelma to everyone, including you."

"Thank you...Thelma." Dougal's beaming grin seemed fixed on his plain face.

"When the weather's so hot we cook and bake early in the day, Bella. That's why we have cold meat and greens now. 'Tis too warm to be eating stews and the like anyway," Thelma said, passing a platter of buttered bread along the table.

"We must be the luckiest from the whole bunch off the ship, eh Bella?" Dougal said quietly. "I'm to sleep alongside the horses in the stable. And I'm to help Ginger with the animals. There aren't that many sheep yet, but he's going to teach me all about the cattle and the horses until the flock grows. How are you settled in then?"

"I have a room of my own too," Isabella said in a low voice, refusing to look at her master, whose eyes she could feel on her as she lifted a slice of roasted lamb on her fork. She was still coming to terms with the fact that he ate along with his servants, talking to them as if they were of the same station.

"That's grand then, isn't it?" Dougal began to eat with relish.

Isabella agreed with him as she savoured the tasty meat. This was grand when put alongside the picture she'd painted of what her life would likely hold for her in this hell of a place. But she'd not own up to it. She'd not give this 'Englishman' the satisfaction of knowing that she was so happy at this moment she felt like crying.

"What was your crime, Bella?" Ginger asked.

Thelma's husband was as thin as his wife. But where Thelma's bones stuck out at her elbows and wrists, his arms were muscular. Thelma was pale as well as skinny, but Ginger looked fit and brown, his back straight. Like his master's. Isabella couldn't believe their luck. This couple seemed to be really pleased to have her and Dougal here with them. Their English master could be tolerated; as long as he didn't prove to be the tyrant she'd expected and start to make a claim on her after the sun went down.

"I attacked a nob with a knife," she said, swallowing a mouthful of food.

"Ye gods!" Her owner narrowed his eyes and Thelma and Ginger sat staring at her in a peculiar way.

"And how did that come about?" Thelma asked after a brief pause.

"It's all right, you don't have to worry that I'm going to kill you all in your beds. I don't make a habit of coming at people with knives. This so-called gent deserved all he got. It was his luck that I was a rotten hand with a weapon. I was aiming below his belt, and he put his hand in the way. I almost chopped his thumb off." Isabella pushed a potato about her plate. "I suppose it was my lucky day too, for if I'd chopped off what I'd intended to I'd have swung and that's for sure."

Tiger Carstairs let out a hoot of laughter.

"So, we don't have to lock up all the sharp implements then, miss?" he asked, turning serious.

"I may look silly but I'm not that daft," she retorted. "I heard on the ship about the way things are run here in the colony. I do realise that I'm likely to be strung up if I don't stick to the rules."

"Good. As long as we know where we stand." Another unreadable look passed between her master and Thelma.

"And have you a family left behind in the old country, girl?" Thelma asked as she seated herself beside her husband.

"Aye, me Ma and three brothers and sisters; all younger than me." Her voice dropped as she lowered her head, remembering the pain at leaving her Ma and the little ones. She would not cry for them! The time

for tears had long passed. There was naught she could do to change anything. But oh how it hurt; her fear for them and her longing to see them again was like an ache deep inside her. How were they faring without her? No doubt Jeremy would be out stealing for them now. He was fifteen, and would probably end up over here in this godforsaken country afore long. It shouldn't have done, but that thought brightened her considerably.

"And what of your father?" Tiger asked.

"Papa's in Newgate. Leastwise he was when I went up for trial. Put there by an English magistrate!" She out-stared her new owner. "He could be dead now for all I know."

"Were you out stealing to feed the rest of your family, then, girl?" Thelma asked.

"Aye." Finishing her meal, she wiped the dish clean with a chunk of bread. Putting the fork down, she sat back and stared at the painting of a horse jumping a fence that graced the wall. "Trying to. And I was doing all right 'til this nob came along and ruined everything!"

"You can write to your ma if you wish, Bella," Tiger allowed, also sitting back and patting his stomach. "Thelma will give you some paper, pen and ink. You can write, can't you?"

"Course I can! Me ma taught us all our letters. She may have only been a housemaid, but her dad taught her and she passed it on to all of us. Papa never quite picked it up though. Still, 'tis likely he'll not be worrying about such things anymore. 'Tis a fact that not many survive Newgate." Her mouth set in a grim line.

"Perhaps he'll get transported, and you'll be together again." Tiger tried to inject his voice with a touch of optimism he didn't really feel.

"I doubt it."

Tiger saw her swallow hard, saw the defeat in her eyes. The quelled fury at the injustice of the penal system rose up to enrage him again. So many honest folk were torn from their families and imprisoned and transported, often for no other reason than their desire to be spared the pangs of hunger. Memories of his own trial and banishment came back to remind him that once he'd been in the same position as she.

Was she speaking the truth? Ye gods! He hoped he hadn't brought home a murderess. She'd been brought to trial for attempting to unman a member of the gentry, but she might have gotten away with murder in the past. He knew well enough how the riffraff protected its own in the hordes that populated the streets of London.

"Last we heard Papa was eaten up with fever an' not given much chance," she muttered. Tiger hoped she wasn't a good actress and a liar. She certainly appeared to be filled with misery at her father's plight, but it could all be an act to gain sympathy.

"Dear lord. Poor soul." Thelma sighed, and Tiger knew Isabella had succeeded in getting Thelma well and truly on her side.

Everyone stared down at their plates in silence, until Thelma urged, "Here now, eat your apple pie," as she cut a large pie into eight segments and passed them each a slice. "Help yourselves to cream." She pointed to the china jug in the centre of the table.

Tiger sighed and reassessed his opinion. At least the pair of newcomers couldn't hide their surprise and pleasure at being presented with edible food. The wench was positively drooling.

One thing he'd promised himself during his own years of suffering and want: once he could afford it no one beneath his wing would ever starve.

CHAPTER FIVE

"No, no, Bella, not like that." Thelma softened her rebuke with a smile as she moved Isabella away from the kitchen table, where she'd been doing her best to prepare a pudding mixture. "Here, let me do it."

Isabella shrugged. "I'm sorry, Thelma, I just don't seem to have the knack, do I?"

"Don't matter none, dear." Thelma flapped a hand her way. "Look, you go and pick them apples for me, then you can peel them. 'Tis clear as the nose on your face you'll never make a cook. From now on you just stick to the laundering and fetching and carrying. There are plenty of tasks to keep you busy. You get on with them all right and I shan't be disappointed."

"Oh, Thelma. I've never had to do much in the way of cooking before, 'cept making stews with the barest of foodscraps. Most things we ate were pinched. I'd never eaten apple pie 'til I came here. There's no apple trees in Stepney, are there? The only fruit I ate was what I nicked off the barrows down the market."

"I know, I know." Thelma took up the wooden spoon.

Isabella and Dougal had been in Tiger Carstairs' house for a week. Life had settled into a pleasant routine. Isabella often expected to find she'd been dreaming. She went to her bed in the tiny room each night feeling tired but happy. Not about to question the strange quirk of fate that had prompted Tiger Carstairs to pick her out of the bunch that fateful day, she got on with her tasks without argument.

It was her job to look after the chickens and the large birds she'd found out were turkeys. She'd taken over the washing and ironing, changing of the bed linen, butter making, collecting the eggs, and the pulling of vegetables from the kitchen garden. She took food slops to the pigs and filled the water troughs for them and the goats. The days sped past. It was hard to believe that no one stood over her or ordered her about. Thelma seemed happy with her.

As for her English owner, he seemed to have forgotten her. This annoyed her, though she wasn't sure why.

Most days Dougal was off early with Ginger and the master working with the animals and helping with the farm chores. He told her they had movable fences for keeping the sheep safely penned at night, and these had to be shifted all the time. Whenever Isabella saw her friend he wore

a contented grin.

Dougal had to make sure the woodpile was kept high to stoke the stove where Thelma did all the cooking. They'd found out Tiger planted two crops each year, one of wheat and one Indian corn. Dougal looked after the small hut where the meat was smoked and he had learnt how to do the salting. He admitted that he wasn't fond of helping with the slaughtering but had to learn to live with it. After all, they had to kill beasts to eat.

Tiger Carstairs owned his house and tract of land and Isabella surmised he had won the money gambling. The nights he went off until all hours she guessed he went to the area known as The Rocks. Here men won and lost large sums of money playing cards, and women sold their bodies to these men who flocked to what Thelma called a 'Den of Iniquity'.

So far Isabella had attended church on Sunday and gone once to the store with Thelma. Tiger Carstairs remained a mystery. Thelma told her he was well liked among his own set, and was obviously a favourite of the Governor, whose residence he visited occasionally. Isabella had also learnt Tiger was known to have a way with the ladies. This fact irritated her so much that she was infuriated with herself.

Sometimes Isabella would wake from a dreamless slumber to hear him going to his bed in the room beside hers. One night he'd stayed away until dawn, and she suspected he'd been with his mistress. She hadn't been able to prise that lady's name from Thelma, who kept her counsel on that side of their master's business.

Going out through the garden gate Isabella passed the hog's enclosure. Following the path through the long grass she went to the small orchard at the end of the home paddock where there were apricot, plum and cherry trees as well as the ones with the green apples for cooking and the sweet rosy ones for eating. Lifting the corner of her apron to wipe a few drops of sweat from her forehead she looked up to the tree bearing the pie apples.

Damnation! The fruit she wanted was just out of her reach. It was too hot to go back for the ladder, then drag it over. The climb looked easy enough.

Hitching her skirt, she tucked it under her apron ties then reached up. With arms and legs swinging she hoisted herself onto the lowest limb, then with tongue caught between her teeth she hauled a leg up and over. With one leg up and the other scrabbling about for a foothold, she

nearly swooned when Tiger Carstairs' voice came from behind and below her.

"What the hell do you think you're doing up there, woman? You'll break your bloody neck!" He sounded genuinely worried.

Isabella loosened her grip as embarrassment enveloped her. Sweet heavens! Her bottom was likely on show. With a small squeal she began to fall.

But instead of hitting the hard-packed ground bottom first as expected she was enfolded in a pair of strong arms. She wriggled, but he held her fast, lowering her to the ground, her back pressed against his front.

He gave a shout of laughter as she began to fight. But when she caught him on his shin with a foot, his amusement died.

"Ouch! Upon my soul, you are the wildest little cat I've ever come across," he growled. "What's the fighting for? I've just saved your life."

"Saved my life?" she spluttered. "I was trying to get up the tree, not down. Let me go!"

Isabella could feel every inch of his hard body pressed against hers, and to her humiliation she felt a strange stirring deep inside. His hands were beneath her skirt, spanning her waist. Their heat burned through the thin material of her camisole. Mortified that she wasn't disgusted at being held by an Englishman, she hit out with her elbows. One caught him square in the ribs and he grunted. But still he held her fast.

"So, you're filling out a bit, I see," he commented, tightening his grip just below her breasts. "A full belly hasn't improved your temper though. Now, be still, little bundle. I'm your master an' I have the right to do as I like with you."

"Do as you like!" Isabella squirmed away from him. With violently shaking hands she straightened her skirt. Her cheeks flamed when she looked up to see he watched her every movement closely, as if it was his right. The twinkle in his eyes made her temper rise. "I'll kill myself if you take what you see as your rights. Anyway, what would you want with the likes of me when you have so many other women chasing after you?"

"Oho, so you've heard the tales of my exploits with the fair sex, have you? I feel I must set you straight on that account. There aren't that many. But you're right on one thing. I wouldn't fancy you in a fit. I prefer my women to be amenable." He placed his hands on his hips, returning her stare with the arrogance that set her teeth on edge.

"Then I'm saved from a fate worse than death, for amenable I'll never be." Isabella stepped out of his reach. But to her horror he made a grab for her, grasping her hand. She tugged but he refused to release it.

"Now then, which fruit did you want?" he asked, his tone now quite pleasant. "Perhaps I can reach it without resorting to climbing the tree."

Isabella stared at him, then pointed to a bunch within easy reach for him. "That one, and those there." She breathed a small sigh of relief when he finally let her go then reached up to pluck them.

"Hold out your apron," he ordered, dropping the apples in. "There, will that satisfy Thelma?"

Pulling free the cloth tied round his neck, he used it to wipe his brow. As he retied it he watched her like a cat stares at a cornered mouse.

"I ... I think so." Isabella gathered her apron to her chest and turned to flee, but he caught her by the arm again.

"Bella. Satisfy my curiosity, will you?"

His soft tone made her suspicious. She watched him cautiously. "How?"

"Are you happy here in my household?" he asked softly, those strange eyes of his searching hers.

"As happy as any woman can be working for an Englishman." That was a dreadful lie, for she'd seldom been happier.

"You're not yet a woman, Bella. You have a lot to learn about how real women behave."

She disagreed, but wasn't about to go into that argument now.

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "Enlighten me if you will. How did you come to hate the English so much that you were willing to attempt to take a slice out of one and so put yourself in line for a hanging?"

Isabella pursed her lips, glaring at him. Why should she tell him anything? But then the fairness of her nature had to allow that he was right. He had saved her from an awful end. She'd seen that Irishman Malloy outside the trading store and his furious stare had assured her that he was still enraged with Tiger Carstairs for taking her away from him. She sensed Malloy wasn't finished with her. This was the first time Tiger had touched her, but if Malloy had had his way and won her at the wharf her body would likely be at the bottom of the cove by now after he'd finished using it.

She looked past him, nibbling her lip. "My ma was dragged away from Ireland and her family when she was almost sixteen. Her wealthy 'English' master decided he wanted her in his house in London." Her

face twisted in a sneer. "She became a domestic maid. But 'twas not housemaiding he wanted her there for, was it? He raped her, didn't he? And her barely more than a week past her sixteenth birthday. When she found out she was having me she went to him pleading for help. The gent tossed her out that night. Without so much as a farthing and only the clothes she stood up in."

Isabella paused, clutching the bundle of apples to her middle. Looking past Tiger she pulled in a deep breath. "Papa was one of the first men wanting her body when she took to the streets, thank the Lord, for I dare say neither her nor me would be alive now."

"And is your stepfather also Irish?" he asked.

She shook her head, lifting her chin as she declared, "No, he was born in Spain."

"Ah, that would account for your first name, eh?"

"Aye, he was brought to England by a sea captain when he was a boy, but he was alone in the world when he met Ma. He's a fine man, the finest father anyone could have."

"So, how is it your name's O'Shea when your pa's Spanish?" Tiger asked quietly.

"Papa knew not where he came from, and couldn't recall his parents, so he took Ma's name. He always said 'twas because he loved her so much when first he set eyes on her." Wistfully she recalled the first time she'd heard the tale, when she'd been barely big enough to climb on his knee.

He nodded. "So, do you know who this nob is who fathered you, Bella?" She noticed his hands were clenched at his sides, as hers were. She would like to strangle the man who had fathered her.

"No. I only know he's dead and buried. And in hell, I hope!"

"Truth is then that you're half English, eh?"

She gave him a scornful glance and he had the gall to smile. "No!" Her retort was vehement. "That so-called gent may have sired me, but me real pa is now in Newgate. That's the only father I'll ever want to know."

"But you can't lump all Englishmen into the same packet because of what your mother suffered."

"Can't I?" Her nails dug into her palms. "I can hate the lot of you as much as I like." One of her fists came up and she shook it beneath his arrogant nose. "You're nothing but a bunch of lecherous scum! 'Twas an English gentleman who put a babe in my belly and took the only

thing I could ever call my own – my innocence. Why do you think I tried to chop his cock off, eh?" His eyes had widened. Isabella knew a moment's satisfaction for giving him such a shock.

"A babe? So, are you still carrying the man's child?" There was a thread of disgust in his tone and briefly she wondered if it was for her or the English pig who had raped her.

"Of course not. I'd be rounder than this now if I was. Don't you know anything about such things? I lost it while awaiting my trial."

He bent his head, but she refused to meet his eyes. She heard him curse and then he lifted her chin with a finger, forcing her to look at him.

"It must have been hell for you," he said simply.

Isabella shrugged her shoulders with false indifference. "I was glad to get rid of it, wasn't I?" she lied.

"No doubt you were. The spawn of an Englishman! I begin to see . . .
" With a lift of his shoulders he turned away from her.

"You see? Don't make me laugh. What would you know of a woman's suffering? How would you know what it feels like to have your pride stripped from you, and your virtue plundered! My Ma and Papa both blame themselves; Papa for not being there to protect me and Ma for having to let me go out foraging for food for the little ones." With a small sound of disgust she poked about in the dirt with the toe of her shoe.

"'Tis a cruel world, for sure," he said softly, and Isabella looked up in time to see a wealth of sympathy in his eyes. But instantly the look was banished as he glanced down at her bad foot.

"By the by. I was having a word with Doc Neale yesterday. He wants to have a look at your foot, Bella. He suggests you may be able to have something done to straighten your toes. Are you willing to let him look at them?"

Startled, she whispered, "Do you really think he'll be able to do anything for me?"

Tiger shrugged, warmed by the gleam of hope in her wide green eyes. What a puzzle she was. One moment a fighting, spitting shecat, the next an almost childlike waif. Here he had her all slotted into place in his mind, and she had surprised him yet again. Truth was he'd never known another woman to intrigue him so. "No harm in going to see the doc. He's quite a character in these parts. The Aborigines think he's a witch doctor, for he cures their children of no end of problems."

"I'd like very much to see him," she agreed quietly, stunning him

with a dazzling smile.

"That's the ticket." Tapping her beneath the chin with a finger, he grinned. "You should smile more often. It makes you look quite pretty."

The smile disappeared to be replaced by a scowl and Tiger laughed. "You really must learn to see the funny side of things, little Bella. I was jesting with you. All right, so you've had a rough trot of it 'til now, but you're sure to break some man's heart one day with your looks, and I've a feeling it's going to be your lover."

"What lover?" Her brows shot together.

Tiger eyed her speculatively. "Our Dougal. So, he's never touched you, eh? You lied to me, did you not? You've never had a man touch you in shared passion. That is if we discount the English nob who forced himself on you and got cut up for his efforts."

"'Tis no business of yours," she retorted. Haughtily she tossed her head and her mobcap fell to the ground. She bent to pick it up and two of the apples dropped. Tiger retrieved them, and as he returned them to her apron her blush deepened. For a moment, bewitched, he watched the colour creeping up her face.

"Everything you do is my business, Bella my girl, and has been from the moment I picked you out at the wharf. And don't you forget it." Taking the cap from her hand he plunked it on her head, then pulled her forward with a fist on either side of it. When her face was level with his shirtfront he lowered his head until his nose touched hers. "If I had a mind to I could take you right here beneath my own apple tree. Could slake my body's needs on your scrawny body, then take you to my bed every night until I tired of you."

"Let me go!"

As she shrieked the order she lifted her hands to thump his chest and the apples tumbled. He released her cap so he could clasp her wrists.

"Never!" The word escaped like an angry curse.

When his mouth covered hers she went ramrod stiff in his arms. Her heart, and his own, thumped in unison as they met, chest to chest.

His tongue probed, and she opened her mouth without resistance. She shivered and he tasted her. He'd never tasted anything sweeter; she was honey and wine, ambrosia. Her back arched and he pressed his aroused flesh hard against the softness of her. Dear God, heat was flooding his loins, a hunger such as he'd never known was filling his vitals. Need filled every part of him, a yearning so potent it was like a

pain constricting his chest. And she was going soft and yielding. For him. Desire for her, strong and encompassing blanked out all reason. He heard a soft moan and realised it came from her.

Stunned, he pulled back, his breathing laboured. She almost stumbled as he let her go. Staring at her astonished face, at her kiss-swollen lips, he could see she was as amazed as he was.

Why the hell had he done that? What a fool! He'd never intended to touch the chit. He felt as if he'd been stripped bare, made vulnerable. How could he have let her get to him that way? Always he was in control of his emotions.

Her sweet lips were trembling; his own felt an almost irresistible urge to repeat what they'd just savoured. With a muffled oath he raked his fingers through his hair, self-disgust warring with another untapped emotion, best not dwell on.

Turning on his heel, he strode away.

Isabella watched his stiffly held back as she touched her mouth. The hot man smell of him still surrounded her, making her feel faint, making her tremble with a strange awareness. Her lips felt soft and warm. Were they or her fingers trembling so? Or both. A quivering deep inside that had begun the moment he'd claimed her mouth refused to stop. It pooled in the centremost part of her, the core of her womanhood. The place that ached with an unfamiliar yearning. She felt as if she teetered on the edge of a precipice.

Ye gods! Why had he kissed her? And why had she let him?

Not for one moment had she felt threatened or felt as if he would take her against her will. Never before had she felt the desire to plead with a man to quench the fires he'd aroused in her.

So that was what shared passion was all about.

In a daze Isabella bent to collect the scattered apples. She felt different somehow, as if he'd taken her apart and put her back together again, mixing all the parts up until she had become a stranger to herself.

With jerky movements she went back to the house, the apples clutched against a heart that still beat in double time.

CHAPTER SIX

"So the doc couldn't do anything to help you?" Thelma asked, her eyes soft with sympathy.

Isabella looked down at her deformed foot. "No, Thelma."

She'd put great store by this visit, building her hopes up until she'd been sick with thinking about the possibility of walking without the limp.

Tiger Carstairs, as promised, had taken her to see Doctor Neale, driving her there and back almost silently. Why he'd bothered, Isabella didn't know. He had barely spoken to her in the past week since the incident beneath the apple tree. Her indignation had reached fever pitch. Let him ignore her. What did she care? She was only too happy to be ignored by the arrogant swine!

"He did say he could perhaps break the bones and reset them," she said wistfully. "But it would be such a task and so painful he can't see the point. May not do much good anyway." She shrugged. "I've grown used to the limp, Thelma. No decent man's likely to be looking twice at me anyway." Vainly she tried to conceal how low her spirits were.

"Is that what you really think, Bella? Goodness me, take a good look at yourself next time you're near a mirror. You're a pretty woman."

Isabella made a rude sound. "You don't have to spin me tales, Thelma. I'm never likely to have the men chasing after me. Leastwise, not for any other reason than to make me their whore."

"Don't talk daft, girl! What about Dougal? He thinks the sun shines out of your ears." Thelma gave Isabella a soft nudge.

"Ah yes, Dougal." Isabella laughed, staring down at her hands. "But he's as daft as I am. I could never see him as any more than a dear friend."

Thelma shook her head. "And one day you'll break his heart, Bella, for sure."

"Oh Thelma, why can't you order yourself to have feelings for someone when you know they love you," Isabella asked, sighing.

"Don't ask me such things." Thelma resumed the podding of the peas. "I know nothing about affairs of the heart, my dear."

"Oh no? You and Ginger certainly are a pair well matched. He worships the ground you walk on. When did you first realise you loved Ginger?" Isabella sat down opposite Thelma, leaning her elbows on the table.

Thelma stopped her podding and gazed out the window. "The first time he stuck his neck on the line for me. We were transported out here on the same ship. In them days men and women used to come over together, and believe me the goings-on aboard that ship are best not spoken about." She paused, then went on, "Ginger was caught poaching in Kent an' they put him on a hulk in the Thames. He reckons it was the best day of his life when they sentenced him to ten years over here."

"But he's free now, Thelma, and so are you. Why do you stay with Tiger Carstairs when you could be off working your own property?" Isabella knew she would be off like a shot from a pistol if she had her ticket of leave.

"Bless my soul, we wouldn't leave Tiger. We're family. Ginger is in his element looking after the sheep and he can come and go as he pleases. Soon we'll have a house of our own, instead of the one room out back, if all goes well and Tiger gets a land grant over the mountains. But we'll always look after Tiger, wherever he goes. And when he gets wed we'll take care of his missus too."

"Is he likely to marry soon?" Isabella felt a pang of dismay at the idea. Obviously because she couldn't see any English wife of Tiger Carstairs wanting a skinny Irish biddy working in her kitchen, she told herself.

"Bless me, no. He's only thirty, an' in his prime. As far as I know he hasn't set his cap at any one in particular. Mind you there's a few females in the colony, free and indentured who'd like to warm his bed." Thelma waved a pea pod at Isabella and laughed.

Isabella turned away. The man was no better than a stallion if the tales she'd heard about him were true. And what infuriated her was, at least from stories she'd overheard after church, that the women who whispered about his exploits with a touch of shock were also the ones who fluttered their eyelashes and blushed coyly when he happened to allow them the time of day.

"Oh, how grand it must be to be a man, eh? They come and go as they please, take whatever women tickle their fancy, then discard them without a second's thought when they tire of them." Isabella got up and went to the window. "I wish I'd been born a man! This world was made for them!"

"Maybe so. But what about them having to provide a roof over our heads eh? And food for us to eat. They can't just sit back and say, I

think I'll take a few weeks off, the animals will thrive without being fed and shorn and protected, the crops will plant and harvest themselves."

"But they'd not get far without us women to wash their linen and cook that food they've carefully grown."

"I guess it works both ways, then. A truly perfect combination is when a pair work together to make life go smooth for each other."

"Oh, Thelma, you think that way because you have Ginger."

"And some day you'll have a husband who cares for you, then you'll think the same as me. Likely it will be Dougal."

Isabella drew in a ragged breath and kept her thoughts to herself. Much as she liked and respected him she couldn't see herself ever thinking of Dougal as a husband. But who else was likely to give her a moment's thought?

Certainly not the man who filled her every waking thought, and most of her dreams, these days.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Isabella frowned. Thelma looked so frail. There was only one thing for it. "I'll go to the doctor's house and pick up some medicine for you," she decided. She couldn't bear to see her friend suffer with this body-racking cough.

"No, dear." Thelma sat on one of the high-backed chairs, a hand to her temple. Massaging the pale skin she shook her head. "I don't want you going off on your own. 'Tis too far."

Isabella waved a hand. "Goodness me, what harm can come to me on the road to town? You've been coughing real bad through the night, and the medicine the doctor mixes up for you is the only thing that eases it."

"I know, but best wait until the men come in from the fields, girl." Another bad spasm had Thelma striving to catch her breath.

Isabella picked up one of her blue-veined hands and stroked it. "I hate to see you this poorly, Thelma."

"But it's too far for you to walk." Thelma wheezed with each breath she took. Isabella bent until she was at eye level.

"Nonsense!" She tapped her chest. "I'm as fit as can be now and a little walk on such a nice day won't do me any harm."

In truth she was worried sick by Thelma's insistent coughing. Ginger was too and only last evening he'd mentioned taking her into town again to visit the doctor. But she needed the medicine right now.

"It's eight miles or more." Thelma shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know, Bella. Tiger'll go mad if he knows I've let you go all that way alone."

Isabella gave her a confident smile. "I'll get a ride on a dray or wagon easy enough. There's always plenty of farmers going in to town at this time of the day. Tiger won't even know I'm gone. I'll be back before they get in for their evening meal, you'll see."

"I don't know." Thelma was still grumbling as Isabella picked up her bonnet and tied it on. "It's in King Street, you know," she reminded her as Isabella went to the door.

"Didn't I go there to see about my foot, silly. I know where 'tis. Now you just sit there and take it easy 'til I get back."

Isabella went down the path to the outer gate, one of the bitches who'd recently whelped loping along at her side. How good it felt to

stroll along and enjoy the singing of the birds and the scenery. In the dreary back streets of Stepney even the sky had always seemed to be dull and grey. The wild beauty of this country thrilled her, made her forget for a while that she was a convict; that her family were so far away that there was little possibility of seeing them again.

It was cooler now, more like a spring day in England. The weather was all upside down here in the colony. They'd been here three months and Dougal was as happy as a pig in muck. Tiger Carstairs had bought more of his precious merinos and Dougal and Ginger were building the flock up.

"Go home to your pups," she ordered the dog when she got to the gate. The bitch slunk off, tail lowered, her milk-swollen belly flopping from side to side. Isabella hadn't gone far when one of Tiger's closest neighbours' cart came trundling along the road.

"Well, well, and what are you doing out alone at this time of the day?" he asked when she hailed him down.

Isabella explained about Thelma's cough and her need to get medicine.

"Jump aboard, deary," he invited. "You shouldn't be on the road without a man along with you. There's escaped cons out here, not to mention the road mobs, and they're a rough bunch." He saw her worried look and chuckled. "Mind you, the ones on the run don't usually keep this close to town in daylight. I'm not going right into town, lass. I'll drop you off at the end of Elizabeth Street, for I'm going over to Brickfield Hill. You should be safe enough there. Will that do you?"

"That'll be fine, Mr Enshaw." Isabella smiled gratefully.

He let her down at the outer edges of town. "Just you make sure you get someone to pick you up, mind," he ordered. "If you're still here when I return you can come home with me. All right? You wait on that corner there." Clicking to the horse, he flicked the reins on its rump.

"I will. Thank you." Isabella waved as she started to walk. There were one or two cottages along this stretch of road, spaced out and set well back. Feeling slightly uneasy again she peered around. It was so quiet, except for the parrots squawking and the whistle of the wind in the trees.

When she came to a house set near its fence that bordered the road she stopped to look at a large white bird with yellow feathers standing high on his head. It sat perched in a cage hanging from a hook beneath the porch. Isabella hated to see any creature caged and wondered why

so many of the settlers found the need to capture these beautiful creatures and confine them in such small prisons. She hovered by the gate, chewing her lip. There was more pleasure to be found watching them flying free, and for a moment she considered releasing it.

A shadow suddenly crossed her path, and she gasped, a hand going to her throat as someone bulky rushed at her. They must have been concealed behind the thick trunk of a eucalyptus tree for she'd thought herself alone. She swallowed a shriek.

"Mr Malloy!"

The ugly Irishman was looming over her. Isabella went to move around him and he sidestepped, barring her way.

"Let me pass." Defiantly she glared at him while her heart hammered against her ribs.

"Well, well, if it isn't Malloy's lucky day. Look who we have here. I've been patient and bided me time, and now I'm about to get what's rightfully mine. It just goes to show, don't it? If you waits around long enough everything comes to you. That Tiger Carstairs thinks 'e can do as he likes. Just because the guvner is all for letting these emancipists have land and animals he thinks he's as good as a free settler like me." His mouth curled, and Isabella recalled what her master had told her of the Irishman's violent nature.

But she was so shocked by this information about Tiger Carstairs that she momentarily forgot her panic at being faced by this monster. "But ... he's as free as you are," she stammered.

"You think so! He was transported same as you, stupid bitch." He guffawed, then spat in the dirt.

"You're wrong! He's a nob." Isabella couldn't believe him. He had to be wrong. "Why else would the Governor give him special rights? And he owns his tract of land and his merino sheep that the Governor likes to breed."

"Cause that's the way of the guvner. Gives them all the rights, don't he?" He made an awful sound in his throat and spat again, near her feet. Isabella jumped sideways. He had moved closer until his stench enveloped her.

"I have messages to run." With a huge effort she tried to keep her voice from shaking as her limbs were. How could she get away from this pile of filth?

"You ain't off anywhere, girl. Nowhere but with me, that is. Think I'd let you go now I've got you where I want you?"

He grabbed her wrist. Isabella yelled, tossing her head from side to side. She looked frantically about. The road was deserted, but surely someone had to be in the house nearby.

"Help!" she screamed.

"Now don't be daft." Malloy looked over his shoulder, grinning when no one came out of the open door. "You can make this easy on yourself and come quietly with me like a good girl or you can make it hard. I don't care how we do it, but you're a going with me, an' that's a fact."

"No! Help me!" she yelled, and his sweaty and sticky hand clamped over her mouth. Isabella gagged, kicking out at his legs.

"Aw, don't make it difficult." There was a thread of pleasure in his tone, as if he wanted her to fight. "Reg!" Using two fingers he whistled shrilly.

A ramshackle cart pulled by a ribby pony trundled into view from where it had been concealed behind a high hedge. A young man of about sixteen, sporting a foolish grin, drove the decrepit vehicle.

"Give us a hand, boy," Malloy ordered. He had one arm around Isabella's middle, one still covering her mouth.

Isabella twisted and fought with all her might, using elbows and fists, lashing out with her feet. Malloy grunted under her onslaught but didn't loosen his grip. What she'd give for a knife right now. She'd not slice this man's thumb off, but put it through his evil heart!

Ye gods! She should have gone along with her instinct and hidden a weapon in her apron pocket. But who would have thought something like this would happen here? She'd become stupid and placid, thinking life would be all roses now she was living in the lap of luxury. What a fool! The world was full of lustful, greedy men, whether it be in the colony, aboard ship, or on the streets of London.

"Now stop that, girlie, or I'll have to knock you out," Malloy muttered near her ear. Isabella shuddered at the vile smell of his breath.

The boy jumped down and reached into the bed of the cart. His high pitched giggle was at odds with his size and bulk as he tossed a piece of stinking sackcloth over her head. Isabella screamed, but she was lifted off the ground and tossed over Reg's shoulder. "She's a real handful, dad," she heard him say as frantically she thumped him, kicking her legs and screaming until her throat hurt. Reg stank as much as his father. The aroma mingled with the smell of the filthy sacking made her want to retch.

"Shut your trap," Malloy gritted, giving her a whack on the backside.

"Let me go, you brute!" Isabella kicked harder, but her frantic efforts only made Reg laugh. When he tossed her onto the cart she landed in the back with a thump that knocked the breath out of her. The cart rocked as Reg clambered in with her.

"Hang onto her, Reg." Malloy chuckled, snorting as the cart rocked again when he climbed up to the front of it. "She's a real lively piece, this one. Sit on her head if needs be. But keep her quiet, d'you hear? Bejesus, what a stroke of luck, eh? I can't believe she's fallen into me hands like a gift from above. Tiger high and mighty Carstairs is going to choke on his own spit when he finds how I've outwitted him." His crude guffaw made Isabella shudder. "Told you I'd find her sooner or later, didn't I?"

"Yea, Dad." Reg's weight fell across her middle. The wagon began to rumble off. Reg ran his hands up and over Isabella's body, settling on her breasts, squeezing until her eyes watered. "She's got nice round tits, Dad."

The bile threatened to choke her. Dear God! How could they do this in the middle of the morning? Surely somebody would come to her aid. This brute and his weak-minded son couldn't get away with kidnapping her in daylight!

She could hear the bustle of the town around her now, and Malloy calling out to people as they passed. The noise grew louder, the stench overpowering as Reg moved about, pressing himself to her and making grunting sounds of pleasure, even while she punched and fought him.

The cart rattled over cobbles before it came to a halt. Isabella could hear numerous accents and dialects, raucous shouts and catcalls. Her worst fears rose up to paralyse her. They were in the wharf area! Tiger had warned her that this was a place no self-respecting woman entered if she valued her life.

A long-forgotten prayer entered her mind. No one would come to her aid now. Kidnappings, rapes and murders were commonplace amongst the riffraff in this part of the town. Whalers and sealers came into the bay to stock with provisions and the crews came here to brawl, drink and find women. Ships carrying goods from China, India and many other places around the world brought crews of many nationalities, and most of the men rarely got further than this area.

God help her! How long before Thelma realised that something had happened and contacted Tiger? They wouldn't know where to start

looking for her. She was a long way from the doctor's house and might as well be the other side of the continent.

Tiger Carstairs hadn't given her a second glance since the day in the orchard. He would likely be glad to see the back of her. But she knew that Dougal would come to her aid if he died in the attempt.

"Oh Dougal," she whimpered. "Please help me."

"Eh?" Reg mumbled as he moved off her.

"I said bring her in, you dope!" his father bawled.

"Oh, right, Dad. She's a nice little piece, isn't she? I can see why you fancied her." Reg jumped down, dragged her across the floor of the cart by her feet, and then slung her over his shoulder like a bag of flour, ignoring her thumps and kicks. Isabella's head bounced against his back, and she thought she would choke on the stench rising from him.

Nearby revellers warbled a sea shanty, their slurred and tuneless voices shouting the verses of a song Isabella had heard often at sea coming from the crew's quarters. Useless to yell for help, no one would hear her.

"Careful boy, we don't want her dying on us before we've had our fill of her, do we?" Malloy sniggered.

Reg stomped down what must have been a narrow passage, for her feet hit the wall with each step he took. He grunted as he stopped.

"Put her on the bed," Malloy ordered. "Then leave her to me, eh?"

"Aw, Dad," Reg whined. "You said I could have a turn with her if I helped you." Reg kept a hand on her chest and Isabella pushed at it, rolling away from him. He laughed as he grabbed her wrist, and she raked her nails across his hand. He laughed louder.

"Get out of here, you silly sod."

Reg let her go, then Isabella heard shuffling. "Here, take this an' go an' fetch us some rum next door. And don't be long, all right!"

Malloy must have pushed his son out of the room. She made up her mind; this was not going to be the end of her. She was not some worthless little Irish biddy who deserved to be pushed around by scum such as this.

Malloy ripped off the sacking and her bonnet along with it. Isabella bit back a scream of terror when she saw that he'd already removed his trousers to free his bulging cock.

Cringing against the bedhead she put her shaking hands to her mouth. Now what should she do? She knew the power of an aroused man, and this time had no knife to defend herself.

"Now, then, tasty wench, it's time I got what should rightfully have been mine months ago. You've got no high and mighty Tiger Carstairs to take you away from me now." He rubbed his palms together, then fondled himself, his beady eyes narrowing.

"Tiger will find me, then kill you!" Isabella declared, scrambling from the bed.

She went to dodge around him, but the room was no bigger than her bedroom at home and Malloy easily threw her back down. She fought with all her might as he came over her. There was no way she would give herself to this dunghope of a man. Better to die fighting than to die after he and his son had had their fill of her. The bed smelt of urine and stale sweat.

"Get away from me, you bloody lump of shit!" Thumping her knuckles on his back and neck, she brought her knee up as far as she could. But he was too close for it to do any great harm.

He forced a knee between her legs and began to part them.

Isabella brought her fists down as hard as she could on his head, one each side of his ears.

This only seemed to amuse him. "Fight all you like wench, there's no one to hear or come to your aid. And they wouldn't care if they did hear you. No one pokes their noses in around here. Open your legs!" His fingers prodded between her thighs.

Isabella raked her nails down the side of his face. Blood began to run from the scratches, which seemed to inflame him. She would never have expected him to have such strength. Grabbing her flailing hands he secured them over her head with a grasp as tight as a steel trap.

Someone rapped on the door. "Malloy!"

Isabella knew this was her only chance to escape. She screamed at the top of her voice, praying the person outside would come to her aid.

Malloy clamped a palm over her mouth. Isabella bit it as hard as she could and he swore obscenely.

"Go away!" he bawled.

"It's Reg." The woman rattled the knob. "The silly bugger's gone and got himself knocked out."

"So? Let the silly sod sleep until he comes to. Not much I can do about it, is there?" Malloy returned his attention to Isabella, fumbling with her skirt and petticoats, lifting them to her waist.

"Help!"

She screamed and increased her struggles when he removed his

hand from her mouth to grasp a fistful of material. Lust filled his bloodshot eyes when they settled on the naked flesh of her thighs. Holding her arms above her head with one hand he ripped her apron off then tore the fronts of her bodice apart. Dribble from his lax mouth splashed onto her bared skin as her breasts fell free, exposed to his greedy eyes.

"Oh gawd, what a sight for a poor sod's eyes!" His scrawny Adam's apple bobbed rapidly as he swallowed.

"They've taken him off. They're gonna have sport with him afore they kill 'im, Malloy. Don't you care if them sods use your boy!" The woman's voice was shrill.

Isabella saw the indecision drift over his eyes as he mouthed a string of vile curses. "Saints preserve us. The silly sod deserves all he gets! Why? Why, does this have to happen to me?"

With a new burst of energy Isabella brought her knee up again. "Scum!" she yelled, as she caught his swollen cock.

He flinched, swearing viciously as he pulled back. Isabella saw his fist coming at her in a mighty swipe.

As it connected with the side of her face she saw bright lights, then slid down a dark tunnel into merciful blackness.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Isabella tasted blood as she moved her tongue over tinder-dry lips. Groaning, she shifted as far as she could before she came up against her bonds.

No! Dear God!

Malloy had tied her arms above her head to the rail at the top of the bed. Worse, her legs were spread, one ankle tied to each corner at its base.

With a moan of pain she wiggled her hips about. Her tattered petticoat was in a corner, where Malloy had thrown it, and her skirt was still bunched up about her waist. Vainly she tried to cover her exposed body by arching her middle, straining to toss the cloth over herself.

Had he raped her before he left? She didn't feel sore down there, so she sent up a prayer as tears slid down her cheeks. Malloy must have decided his son was more important than abusing her. For the moment. But he would be back to finish what he'd started. Sobbing, she craned her neck towards the tiny window where cobwebs dangled like tattered curtains.

It was still daylight, but she had no idea of the time. The street outside was alive with the raucous sounds, but from what she'd heard since arriving in the colony this area was renowned for its never-ending round of sinful happenings.

What was she going to do? She struggled with her bindings, but all she succeeded in doing was ripping more skin off her wrists and ankles. Any minute Malloy would return and carry on where he'd left off.

"Help," she shouted, again and again until her voice rasped. Who would hear her in the endless din that was going on outside? Even if they heard her she doubted anyone would take any notice. Malloy was right, hers was just another cry drifting through the filthy window.

But she couldn't just lie and await her fate. She began to yell until her throat hurt.

She must have dozed, for she jumped awake to hear heavy footsteps along the passage outside, then someone shouted on the other side of the door, thumping on the wood at the same time. The voice was deep and so familiar that she began to sob.

"In here." Her cry came out as a croak. Pitiful. Wetting her arid lips Isabella tried again.

A hammering, then a splintering of wood accompanied a string of muffled curses. The door fell inwards, hanging askew on its rusted hinges and Tiger Carstairs barged in. His fists flailed as he let out a string of curses Isabella had never thought to hear from a gentleman.

But then he wasn't gentry, was he? Just a convict, the same as her.

Relief rushed over her and a silly giggle burst from her lips, followed by a hiccup as he bent over her. Words of thanks tumbled out in a rambling stream as tears gushed from her eyes.

"Good God, girl, what's that devil done to you?" he roared. Pulling her skirt down he took out a knife from the top of his boot and sliced through her bindings. "I'll see the swine sent to gaol for this!" Scooping her into his arms, he held her close to his chest while her soft giggles turned to sobs.

She couldn't stop shaking; her teeth chattering. "He was going to ... to ... but then his son ... Oh Tiger, I was so frightened." His familiar scent was all around her, comforting. She clung to him as shudders racked through her.

"Hush. Just tell me, did he finish the job?" The question was growled into her ear, his mouth warm, as he rocked her back and forth like a small child needing comforting after a nightmare.

"I . . . No."

He pulled back to stare into her face, his eyes narrowing on her jaw. Cursing again he ran a gentle finger over her chin. "You have a nasty bruise there," he said softly. When she flinched he dropped his hand, his eyes filled with tenderness.

"He knocked me out . . . " Isabella saw him swallow hard.

Taking each of her sore wrists in his hands he scowled down at them, cursing under his breath. Isabella flinched again and withdrew them.

Without another word he picked her up. Carrying her across the room, he kicked at the door, clearing the way as he strode out. The dim passageway was crammed with interested onlookers. Isabella buried her face in the comforting warmth of Tiger's shirtfront. She could hear the hammering of his heart beneath her cheek. If I die now I'll be content, she thought, then berated herself for her foolishness.

"Out of the way," Tiger shouted. "Surely to God one of you no-hopers knew what that brute was doing to the woman! Have you all sunk so low that you couldn't help someone in trouble!"

The crowd moved aside, some offering mild excuses. Isabella

glimpsed a few painted faces and bloodshot eyes as he carried her out to the street.

"Bella!" Dougal's shout was filled with relief and joy. Lifting her head from its safe refuge she saw her friend seated at the front of the wagon, his eyes bleak. "Are you all right, love? We were worried out of our minds. What did that bastard do to you?" he asked.

Tiger set her down gently on a pile of sacking in the back of the wagon, then climbed in to sit opposite her. "Leave it now, Dougal," he said, and Isabella would have sworn his voice quivered. "She's safe." He swore again, his mouth set grimly. "But Malloy'll pay dearly for this day's work or my name's not Tiger Carstairs. Let's get her home."

"Right, Tiger." Dougal made a clicking sound and slapped the reins. The grey gelding moved off. Isabella sat with shoulders hunched. Every part of her was trembling as if with an ague. She'd gotten used to the feel of the soft whisper of her petticoat and missed it. She pressed her knees together. The air and sunlight stung the raw skin at her wrists and ankles.

"How did you know where to find me?" she whispered. She couldn't look Tiger in the eye. All she kept thinking of was how she must have looked when he burst in and found her with her body exposed.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw that he looked ahead, avoiding her eyes too. "I was in the district." His voice sounded strangely taut. "Thelma got worried about you when you didn't return home at the expected time. Luckily Dougal went home to pick up something for Ginger and Thelma sent him looking for me. Dougal knew where to find me."

I'll bet, Isabella thought, sighing. No doubt he was visiting one of the many whores who frequented The Rocks. She pursed her lips, and he shook his head, looking straight at her then. He patted her knee and she skidded her legs out of his reach.

"Now don't go jumping to conclusions, miss. I was in a card game and left a winning hand to come to your rescue."

"So, you can read my mind, can you?" she retorted.

"Your face is an open book, wench. You can't keep any secrets from me. Are you feeling better now?"

Isabella blinked. His soft inquiry was like a caress, and his eyes touched her just as gently as they roved over her face. She nodded, unable to find words. Since the kiss in the orchard he hadn't spent one moment alone with her.

"I can't for a minute imagine what possessed Thelma to let you go gallivanting off on your own. She should know better."

"Don't blame Thelma. She told me you'd be annoyed with her for letting me go. But her cough was so bad, Tiger, and she'd run out of her medicine. I got a lift in with Mr Enshaw, and would have been fine if he hadn't had to drop me outside the town."

"Oh yes, fine," he grunted, shaking his head. "You should have waited until one of us men was able to go with you."

"It was just unfortunate that Malloy happened along." She stared at her painful wrists, her fingers clenched.

"Malloy will pay, don't fret. He'll end up in chains if I have any say in it." Reaching out he stroked his fingers with such tenderness over the bruise on her jaw that she was transfixed, unable to move. When he returned his hand to the side of the wagon Isabella could still feel that warm touch on her cheek.

"I would have done away with him if I'd had a weapon!"

His brows shot up. "Bloodthirsty little wench!" There was a touch of amusement in his tone. "Fat lot of good that would have done you." He shook his head. "You're a convict. You would have been swinging from the gibbet before tomorrow's sun set."

"Speaking of convicts, how is it that an ex con gets to be a friend of the governor?" she asked softly.

Tiger chuckled, a deep sound that vibrated around in his chest. He looked hard at her, then asked, "So, how do you feel about me now you know my background's no different from yours, eh? Who told you then?"

"Malloy." She sniffed. "Why did you let me think you was a nob? Did it amuse you, Englishman?"

"You're the only one who can make it sound like an insult to be called thus. If the truth be known I have no more admiration for the English government than you. Mind you, I can't complain about my lot in life now. I have a nice flock growing, a fair crop each year, a few acres to call my own, plus a house. If I hadn't been transported I'd still be picking pockets and cheating at cards in good old London Town." He grinned, lifting a hand to push his hat back on his head. Casually he raked a hand through his hair.

"How long have you been here, then?" she asked.

"Since eighteen hundred. I was twelve. Sent over for petty thieving." He shrugged and pulled his lips back over even teeth. "My Dad died in

a hulk on the Thames when I was seven. Had to steal to live, same as you. We came from Kent. I think my old man probably died of a broken heart. He must have hated being locked up in that stinking hole." He pressed his lips together, and Isabella knew she wouldn't get any more out of him. But she'd learnt more than she ever expected to know of this enigmatic man who owned her.

"So, you've been here for eighteen years." She gave him a swift glance. "How long have you been free?"

"Six years. Here we are, home. I'll let you in on some more of my dark secrets later." He jumped out of the wagon and undid the back flap. He held his arms out and with a sense of diffidence she allowed herself to be lifted clear of the wagon.

He let her go as soon as her feet hit the ground, turning away.

"Lord sakes, girl, where did you go?" Thelma came at a trot out of the house, wiping her hands on her apron. "I've been worried out of my mind!" She began to cough, turning away until the spasm had passed. Tiger gave her a disturbed look when she had trouble catching her breath.

"Malloy took her to the docks area and holed her up behind a tavern. The Almighty must have been watching over her, Thelma, for he was called away. That fool of a son of his got himself done in. Got in a fight over a mug of rum, it seems. Our Bella has him to thank. His life for hers, seems fair to me." He pulled his lips back in a mirthless smile. "Get her wounds tended and put her to bed, Thelma. And you." He jabbed a finger at Isabella. "Never set foot outside this farm again without a man as escort. Understand?"

He waited for her nod before adding, "And Thelma, send Dougal here to the doctor for your medicine. That cough of yours is hanging on too long. I've got one or two errands to attend to. Don't expect me home soon." With those words he turned purposefully to untie Satan from where he'd been hitched behind the wagon.

"Is he going to ... ?" Isabella whispered to Thelma.

"Never you mind, love. He takes care of his own, does Tiger." Thelma put an arm about her shoulders as Tiger vaulted into the saddle and thundered down the path.

His own. Isabella savoured the words. Was she one of his own now? Seemed she was.

"I'll be off to the doc's then," Dougal said, sending her a smile. Isabella gave a small wave as he turned the wagon about, then she

allowed Thelma to lead her inside.

Tiger was carried along by his rage. If he could get away with murder he'd kill the swine this night. But Malloy wasn't worth swinging for. So he'd just have to make sure the Irishman never got the chance to get at Bella again. Or any lass.

Clicking his fingers he looked out at the ships riding at anchor, especially one he knew well. Grinning, he rode on. Just the ticket. Yes, that would solve the problem well. Once dumped on the shores of England again the worthless scum would be forced to live on his wits, same as Tiger and Bella herself had had to.

What a plucky wench she was. After all she'd gone through she was still able to smile. Still had it in her to be as sharp as a needle. He found he rather liked the edge to her tongue. She seemed to take up an awful lot of his thoughts lately, and he was at a loss to explain just why. She certainly wasn't the loveliest of all the women he knew, or the most tractable. Perhaps that was the answer: she never gave an inch.

Ye Gods, when he'd walked into that filthy hovel and seen her spread out in that degrading fashion, he'd almost gone straight out to find Malloy to squeeze him by the neck until every last breath had left his body. But this idea was much more satisfactory.

Slowing Satan to a walk as he reached the narrow streets around the wharf he made his way to Jackson's Tavern, one of the better drinking holes in the area. A bony boy jumped out of the shadows. He was about ten and lived on his wits, reminding Tiger of himself at that age. "Hello there, Joe. Take care of Satan for me, eh? I have some business to attend to." Tiger dismounted.

"Yes sir, Mr Tiger." Joe caught the coin Tiger tossed him. Stroking the stallion's nose, he walked the horse away, murmuring words of encouragement. Tiger smiled. Joe barely came to Satan's belly, but Tiger knew his horse was safe with the lad.

"Give you a night of fun, cheap, 'ansome," a woman slurred from the shadows as Tiger made for the door of the tavern. Lurching forward she presented him a view of a pair of luscious breasts ready to spring from the bodice of her gaudy dress. In the stream of light coming through the window he saw that she was past her prime, probably full of disease if her pallid spotty skin was anything to go by. Her unwashed hair hung in

limp clumps around her painted face and as she gave him what she probably considered a seductive smile he noticed her mouth was full of rotten teeth.

"Sorry, love, I haven't the time this evening. Perhaps another time," he lied. Reaching into his pocket he fished out another coin. "Have a sip of rum on me."

"Ta, mister." With the coin clasped in her palm, she followed him into the smoke-filled tavern.

Tiger was accosted another couple of times on his way over to a table in a corner where he'd spotted the man he was looking for.

"Captain Tate!" he hailed his good friend.

A man whose face testified to a lifetime spent out in all weathers stood unsteadily and raised a hand in welcome. The buxom blonde woman who had been half sitting on his lap fell on her bottom at his feet.

"Tiger, old son! Good to see you again. Though 'twas not so long ago we said our fond farewells. I thought you'd be safely tucked up in your bed by now, with a comely lass to keep you warm." He grinned as he flopped back down on the seat. The woman plopped herself on his knees again and wound her ample arms about his neck. He kissed her painted mouth noisily.

"Would have been, Captain, but something unforeseen cropped up." Tiger sat opposite the captain, shaking his head when another harlot offered to sit on his lap. She pouted and flounced away. "Have you room in your hold for one more passenger? One who won't be willing to travel the waters with you, but one I intend to see gets a hasty passage back to the old country, or anywhere other than New South Wales."

"Always room for one more, lad." Captain Tate winked and touched the side of his rosy bulbous nose. The doxie on his lap gave him a wet kiss and he pushed her away with a reproving grunt. "Hold hard, woman, can't you see I have other things on my mind for the minute," he told her, grinning. She fondled his neck and he grabbed her hand. "Now then, Tiger, my lad, we sail in the hour before dawn, as you know. Have him, or her, on board in good time an' I'll be glad to take 'em along."

He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "An' supposing this person just 'appens to fall overboard in one of those nasty old storms we often meet up with around The Cape, eh?"

"No one on this earth will shed too many tears over the loss," Tiger spat. "I'll have him at the wharf in good time, Captain." Tiger turned to

go, then went back and slapped the Captain a couple of times on the shoulder. "I owe you one, old friend."

"Always a good feeling to have Tiger Carstairs in my debt." The Captain chuckled, then smacked a kiss on the plump bosom overflowing his female companion's bodice. With a smile of bliss he lifted his head. "Me first mate will be there. Tell him I gave orders for your passenger to be locked up nice and snug. Keep well, old son," he shouted after Tiger, who touched his forehead in acknowledgment of the numerous calls from around the smoky bar as he strode out.

Tiger knew what public house Malloy frequented. No doubt he'd be there now, wallowing in self pity because his plans had gone awry. And perhaps he was sparing a moment for grief over the demise of his dolt of a son. But that was unlikely. Where there was no sense there was little feeling.

A devilish grin split Tiger's face as he headed for the den where Malloy lurked, stopping off first to tell Joe to follow him with Satan, and to pick up something from the yard behind the tavern.

"Ho, Malloy," Tiger called softly. What a stroke of luck! The Irishman was just coming out of the Duck and Feathers, a doxie on his arm.

Malloy peered through the gloom, his face a mixture of rage and dismay when he saw his arch-enemy standing before him, legs astride, his riding crop slapping against a palm.

"What d'ya want, Carstairs?" he asked belligerently. "Sod off! You've caused me enough strife to last me a lifetime!"

"Nowhere near what I intend to cause you from this night forward. You took my property, set your filthy paws on a woman of my household. For that sin you'll pay dearly." Tiger delivered the words with deadly calm.

Malloy's eyes flicked from side to side, his tongue sliding over his slobbering lips as he pulled the doxie closer for protection.

"Get away, woman," Tiger ordered. "Find another customer. This one's going to be busy for a while."

The woman craned her neck to peer at Malloy, then disentangled his hands from her waist and stepped away from him.

"You stay here," Malloy told her, but she sidestepped, dodging out

of his reach, running back to the bar of the public house. "Now look what you've done!" Malloy shook a fist. "I'll kill you for this!"

"You could try," Tiger invited, circling Malloy and grinning. "Come on, try it now."

Malloy licked his lips and backed up, watching the crop so intently he missed his footing and stumbled. Tiger pounced. "Right Joe, give me the sack," he shouted, securing Malloy's arms behind his back. The Irishman was no match for Tiger's strength.

"Let me go," he yelled, but Tiger already had the sack over his head and secured with a length of rope.

"Fetch Satan, Joe." Tiger nodded to the grinning boy. Malloy began to struggle, but Tiger laughed as he brought a fist down on the Irishman's ear. Malloy crumpled and hit the ground with a dull thud.

"Hold Satan steady, boy, and I'll just toss this swine over his back. Much as I hate to have his filthy body on my horse, 'tis too far for me to tote him to the wharf. You run along now Joe, and remember, you don't know where I went after leaving Jackson's tavern, right?"

"Aye, sir." Joe touched a finger to the side of his nose, still grinning. "I never saw a thing. After you left I went on 'ome."

"Good lad." Tiger gave him another coin and the boy disappeared into the shadows.

Tiger led Satan through the alleyways. He passed few people and those he did see were too engrossed in their own business to give him a second glance. The inhabitants of these parts were used to seeing drunks carried home on horseback.

Captain Tate's crew knew Tiger well, and it was a simple matter to have Malloy rowed out to the ship, where the first mate followed his captain's orders to the letter.

Tiger rode home with a smug sense of a job accomplished. That gutter rat would force himself on no women again.

CHAPTER NINE

Isabella loved the trading store, with its shelves lined with everything from trousers, shirts and waistcoats, to cashmere shawls, china dinner sets, tobacco and chamber pots and a thousand other items.

The storekeeper had left the old country with a few hundred pounds to spend and had since made a fortune reselling goods picked up at ports of call on the way over.

Back home Isabella had often been chased out of the shops once the storekeeper found out she had naught to spend and was just idling her time, daydreaming about buying the fancy goods on display.

While Thelma ordered the supplies and provisions needed to see them through the week Isabella stood fingering a skein of fine silk thread that sat jumbled in a tray with several shades and thickness of embroidery yarn. How she wished she could buy it as a gift for Thelma. One day she would be rich. When she gained her ticket of leave. How she would achieve that blessed state she had no idea, but dreams were there for all fools.

"Bella, is that you gal?" a familiar voice called.

Isabella looked up, her face breaking into a wide smile. "Gracie! How are you?" she greeted her shipboard friend. Making her way round the shelves to Gracie's side Isabella hugged her. "Are you doing all right? Look at you, you certainly look as if you've fallen on your feet." Circling Gracie, Isabella admired her neat frock, spotless apron and shawl.

"Bless my soul, dearie, I've got a job in a posh gent's kitchen, ain't I? Me who didn't even know 'ow to boil water!" Gracie took hold of Isabella's arms and looked her over. "You 'appy, girl? You look as if you're doing all right too. 'Ow's the gold nob treating yer? Not so bad 'ere after all, is it?" Gracie let out a raucous laugh and threw back her head. A couple of women on the other side of the store eyed her with disapproval. When Gracie winked at them they resumed their perusal of some rolls of calico, their mouths pinched.

"Not so bad, Gracie. I have a room of my own, and my belly's never been so full in all my life." Isabella patted her middle.

"An' how's life with the giant of a fellow with the eyes of a tiger, eh? Been warming his bed, 'ave you?"

"I have not!" She glanced down at her feet to hide her blush. "He's got plenty of women to do that for him. What would he need with a scrawny biddy like me eh? Tiger Carstairs don't spare me the time of day."

"That's not what I 'eard." Gracie pulled a wry face, chuckling as she tapped the side of her nose.

"Oh, and what exactly did you hear, Gracie, you nosy old devil you?"

"I 'eard all about 'ow he came after you and rescued you from that old pile of sheep's droppings, Malloy. An' I also 'eard he arranged for that man's disappearance." Gracie glanced about, then lowered her voice. "Seems he was said to be on the ship that was heading back to the old country."

"Aye, that's a fact Gracie. There's not much that goes on here that everyone don't hear about, is there? Tiger Carstairs looks after his own, and as I'm one of his workers, I'm classed as his responsibility." Isabella shrugged. She was still astonished at the way he had solved the problem. And it seemed that half the colony was aware of what he'd done, yet the constables hadn't come down on him.

"So it ain't so bad working for the English gent then?" Gracie pulled at a lock of Isabella's hair that peeped from beneath her bonnet.

"No, Gracie, it isn't so bad. He treats us well. Dougal is as happy as a pig in muck, looking after them fool merinos. Thelma's a grand woman and her husband Ginger is really kind. What more can a con ask?"

"What indeed, girl! We could have ended upriver at Parramatta. Those sluts sewing and laundering uniforms up there are a bunch of whoring, brawling drunken sots. I 'eard the women are sorted into three classes there and that Marjorie is in the crime class, wouldn't yer know. Already she's had her hair cut off as a sign of her disgrace. Always knew she'd end up a no-hoper, that one! 'Tis said the officers use it as a whorehouse.

"No, we're lucky we've fallen on our feet, girl. I'd say we're better off than we were back in the old country, scavenging about for a mouthful of food and never knowing when a fever'd strike us down. An' when we're given our tickets we'll be laughing, eh! I'm not sorry I got meself sent 'ere, an' that's a fact, Bella." Gracie pushed her bosom up with her folded arms.

"I miss me ma though, Gracie." Isabella drew in a shuddery breath. "If I knew she was faring all right I'd be a lot happier. Mr Carstairs let me

write a letter to her. I can't wait for the ship to get back with her answer." She glanced across the store. "Ah, here's Thelma, looks like she's finished placing her order. I'd like you to meet her. She's the next best thing to a mother a girl could have."

Thelma nodded to the storeowner, then strolled over to join them.

"Thelma, this here's Gracie. You remember I told you she looked out for me on the ship. She's got a good job too, working in a nob's kitchen, probably burning the cakes." Isabella laughed as she put an arm about Gracie's waist.

The two woman eyed each other. Thelma nodded and held out one of her bony hands. "Pleased as punch to meet you at last, Gracie. Bella here told me how you kept the riffraff out of her hair on the voyage. She's mighty lucky to have friends like you and Dougal."

"And now I have you and Ginger, Thelma. I don't know what I've done to deserve such friends." Isabella clasped one of Thelma's hands gently.

"And Tiger, don't forget him, girl," Thelma reminded her. "Without him you might not be here now to tell the tale."

"Aye, that's true." Isabella nodded.

"Oh, I've just remembered I need some thread and needles too. I'll see you again I hope, Gracie," Thelma said, nodding as she walked off.

"She seems a likeable sort," Gracie commented when they were alone.

"Oh she is, Gracie. I worry about her a lot. She has a cough that never seems to go away, and she don't seem to get any fatter no matter what she eats." Isabella frowned, then brightened as she said, "Her husband and Dougal are a pair well matched, love those stupid sheep. What's your master like, and is his wife nice or a bit of a prissy missus like some of these nob's?"

"Well, she thinks she's a cut above the likes of me, of course." Gracie pulled in her chin. "And she has a regular list of do's and don'ts we have to follow, but when all's said and done we're well cared for. I mean, if we was in the old country would we be allowed to walk around like we was free? Like this?" She waved her hands about, and chuckled. "Oh no, we'd be locked up in some squalid prison. I don't mind telling you Bella, I'm content and that's a fact."

Gracie glanced over Isabella's shoulder, her grey eyebrows going up. "Oh, oh, 'ave to go, Bella. That's my missus over there in the green muslin. See you again. And you take care of yourself, d'you hear?"

"You too, Gracie." Isabella gave her another quick hug. She returned Gracie's wave as her friend went to take her mistress's parcels. With a grin and a wink Gracie followed the woman from the store.

Gracie was right, they were indeed fortunate. A shudder ran through Isabella as she recalled the months on the ship, locked up below decks, enduring the stink, heat, and boredom, half dead with fear of what the future held. Those fears had receded now, but a remnant of them would always remain deep within to haunt her.

CHAPTER TEN

"It'll only be a matter of time, Ginger, before the Governor allows us grants over at Bathurst."

Leaning back in his chair, Tiger crossed his legs, staring at his feet. Putting his hands behind his head he went on, "The grants he issued in March is the start; soon they'll be letting us have pastures over the mountains, mark my words. God, it's been five years since they found a way over. Once the Governor ordered the road built I thought we'd be given the go ahead. Why do the officials take so long to get things moving?" With an impatient gesture he bent to toss a log on the fire, sending sparks flying up the wide chimney.

Isabella watched the log flare up. "I still can't believe it gets so cold here in winter," she said.

Thelma's chair was the nearest to the fire, for she felt the cold more than anyone. Isabella sat on a low stool at her side.

"Aye, it took me a while to get used to it being chilly in August." Thelma nodded, plying her needle.

To Isabella, the best thing about winter was having everyone sitting around the fire like this after the day's work was finished. Even Tiger didn't go off so much in the evening when the wind howled across the paddocks and whistled about the house. There was nothing nicer than listening to the men dreaming about the future. And Tiger's dream was to go over those blessed mountains. He talked of little else. Seemed it was a paradise for the sheep breeders, over those haze-shrouded mountains.

Ginger took a draw on his pipe. "'Tis always the same, Tiger, government officials always were long winded. We all took it for granted we'd be allowed to go over as soon as the road was finished."

"I heard there were big celebrations the day the men came back from the crossing," Dougal said, leaning forward.

"Aye." Tiger nodded. "They put an end to the rumours that had run around for years. Some fools said there was a great inland sea on the other side of the mountains; some reckoned it was all desert. Others said paradise or China were over there. But us with a bit of sense already had it worked out, that with all those mountains with streams and creeks running down them there had to be rich pasture over yonder, not desert." He sighed. "The way the colony's expanding we'll run out of grazing land pretty soon. 'Tis the only way to go. We lose stock every

summer when it gets drier than a desert. Then there's the floods!"

"People still talk about when the Hawkesbury flooded," Dougal said.

"Aye, it was awful. This can be a harsh land," Ginger agreed.

"It certainly is. But when we get over those mountains we'll be living like princes." Tiger's eyes took on the glint they always wore when he talked of his dreams.

Ginger dragged on his pipe and Dougal stared at the fire, no doubt picturing the future where his sheep were all stuffing themselves on the lush grass of the Bathurst plains.

Isabella resumed her sewing. Tiger Carstairs in his arrogance believed that anything he set his mind to was possible. But usually things did have a way of working out to his satisfaction.

"Tell me about what it's like over there," Dougal urged after a brief lull.

Tiger sat back. "The great pastures stretch endlessly with enough grass to support millions of sheep. Our merinos will grow fat and healthy and the fleece will be the finest anyone in the world can produce."

"When do you think we'll be able to move, Tiger?"

Tiger sighed. "We've all been waiting for the governor to get the Bathurst district surveyed." With a small impatient gesture he pushed his hair back. "The road over the mountains is said to be a bit steep in places, mind. And they say the road down Mount York is hazardous."

"Do you think we'll be able to manage it?" Thelma paused in her sewing, frowning.

"Of course!" Tiger assured her arrogantly. "If only I could get my land grant. I aim to have a flock as big and as good as Macarthur's. The English textile makers are greedy for our fleece, and I intend to satisfy the spinners over there by producing wool as fine as Macarthur."

"His fleece certainly has a fine reputation. Ginger was telling me about when he brought the first ewes and rams here," Dougal said.

"Oh, he was, eh?" Tiger smiled Ginger's way. "Macarthur had the sense to cross Indian sheep with Irish and by blending the two wools came up with the fine fleece we have today."

Lulled by the conversation Isabella glanced over to see that Thelma had dropped her sewing on the floor. She clicked her tongue as with a jerk Thelma opened her eyes, then began to cough again.

"I'll be away to my bed." Thelma pushed herself upright, yawning.

Her dear friend wasn't faring at all well in the cold weather. "Here, put your shawl on, Thelma," Isabella said. "'Tis blowing a gale outside.

I'll come to the outhouse with you, and then be off to my own bed."

"When we get over the mountains," Tiger said. "I'll build a fine house with all the rooms connected by an inner passage. Then you'll not have to brave the cold to reach your bedroom, Thelma. Better still, we'll build that house of your own I always promised you."

"Aye Tiger, that'll be grand," Thelma agreed, but when they were outside she muttered to Isabella, "According to Tiger it'll be paradise over those blessed mountains. I only hope he knows what he's thinking on, dragging us all there."

"Don't matter none what we think, Thelma, he'll always do just what he plans." Isabella pulled her shawl tighter.

The man followed a trail of his own, making his own destiny.

"Six months. It don't seem possible we've been here that long, does it, Bella?" Dougal asked as he stooped to pick up the harness from beside the cart.

"Sometimes I feel as if I've been here all my life, Dougal, and nothing happened to me before I came. At times now I can't remember ever feeling as if my belly was never going to stop rumbling with hunger." She could hardly recall how she'd summoned the courage, or was it idiocy, to wield a knife in revenge.

Isabella gazed off into the distance where the cattle's din sent a flock of cockatoos into squawking frenzy. The sun had a gentle warmth to it, and she closed her eyes as she lifted her face, letting it wash over her. A flying insect landed on her nose. Brushing it off she opened her eyes to give Dougal a sidelong glance.

He was smiling at her and Isabella wished that he wouldn't look at her with such adoration. She'd tried to stop him harbouring notions that one day she would fall in love with him. Why was he so thickheaded? A fool would see that if that emotion weren't in her heart now, it would never suddenly spring to life.

But didn't she know all about foolish dreams? Of hoping to change someone's feelings about another? She was just as thick brained as Dougal.

With her hair now reaching her shoulders and her skin clear from the good food and sunshine she knew she presented a more becoming picture than on the day they'd arrived. But most of the time Tiger treated

her as if she was no more than his chattel. Still and all, she could only blame herself, for hadn't she carried on like a woman of the streets when he had chosen her at the wharf?

Somehow his manner toward her had changed since he'd rescued her from Malloy. It was puzzling, for at times he behaved as if she was a nuisance, then at others he'd look through her as if she wasn't there. On a few occasions she'd caught him watching her in a way that set her pulse to thumping and at these rare times he'd hastily look away as if he hadn't realised he was staring.

What did she care anyway! She now knew for certain that he had a mistress. Now she got out and about more she'd learned a lot of things. The women of the colony loved nothing better than a bit of juicy gossip. Tiger Carstairs had earned the reputation of being a rogue. He could spin a tale with the best of the men, and now she knew him better it wasn't so difficult to imagine why she had thought him one of the nobs. He could mix with any company from the highest to the lowliest, the wealthiest to the poorest.

"If you hadn't spoken up for me, Bella, I hate to think where I may have ended up."

Isabella blinked as she looked back at Dougal. Nodding vaguely she thought for the thousandth time how the two men differed in every way possible. The more she got to know Tiger the duller Dougal seemed. Tiger had a fire in his eyes when he talked about his dreams; Dougal only ever got excited about the sheep and how their wool was improving. He was as boring as one of his stupid charges.

"Funny, isn't it, how fate works things out for us. If Tiger hadn't taken a fancy to you I wouldn't have got a job working with the sheep, eh, Bella."

"Aye, 'tis strange for sure."

Taken a fancy to her! She nearly spluttered. Still, it was a mystery she hadn't been able to fathom out. Why had Tiger Carstairs been so definite that day and stolen her away from that Mr Tonkins? And been ready to fight the Irishman for her? Yet often now she got the impression he wished he hadn't bothered. Ah well, Thelma seemed pleased with her work and that was all that mattered. Who was she trying to convince? She could lie to others, but not to herself. She lived for Tiger's approval; pined for his attention.

"Hand me up that piece of harness, Bella."

Dougal interrupted her thoughts and she shook herself; annoyed

that so much of her day seemed to be spent wondering about her arrogant English master. Isabella bent to pass him the leather strap, and Dougal's face reddened as their hands touched. His face was near to hers and she felt a tremble in his fingers.

"Bella?" he whispered, a plea in his voice.

"I have to get on with my chores," she said brusquely, pressing the strap on him and turning away. The look of longing on his face annoyed her. Why did he have to make such a fool of himself?

But wasn't she just as big a fool for harbouring her own secret dreams? Not that she'd leave herself open for scorn by showing how she felt. Not as long as she had a breath in her body, she wouldn't.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Selena, you know how I hate to be pushed." Tiger sighed. Annoyed with her and with himself, he rubbed his nape irritably.

Selena came up on her elbows, gazing at him from beneath lowered lids. "Push you? One thing you've never accused me of doing before is acting like a jealous wife! Have I ever demanded anything of you, Tiger? No?" she queried at his slightly raised brows.

Tiger looked down at her as he tucked his shirt into his waistband. Selena took the opportunity to stretch languidly, drawing his eyes to her luscious breasts with their rosy nipples. He swallowed a small sound of impatience as she ran her fingers through the tumbled mass of her hair. With the sheets rumpled about her and the plump down pillows strewn across the bed she looked very desirable.

"Our relationship has always been one of trust and acceptance, Selena. I refuse to be made to feel guilty. I've never once laid down laws or placed barriers on your conduct, so I suggest you follow my example and don't set down rules for me."

Angry now, Tiger bent to pull on his boots. Giving Selena a sideways glance he saw the glitter of something nasty flash over her eyes. Yes, it was time this liaison was drawn to a conclusion.

"I accompanied you last year to the Governor's pre Christmas ball, and naturally presumed..." Selena picked at a nonexistent piece of thread on the bed linen beneath her.

Tiger knew the languid pose was feigned. She was seething with temper, he could almost feel the tension in her reaching out to him across the room. Selena was a woman of strong passions; her temper roused would be an awesome thing. But never one to be led by the nose, he had no intention of letting her get her own way.

"Never presume anything in this life, Selena, and you won't be disappointed," he told her as he picked up his waistcoat and pulled it on.

"You're cruel, Tiger Carstairs," she flung at him as he made for the door.

"I'm as I've always been, Selena." He dragged in a deep breath. "Our ... affair has run its course. Time to move on, I suggest. Don't look so crestfallen, darling. You have a queue of officers waiting for the pleasure of your company."

"But I don't want them, Tiger, darling. I want ..."

Tiger swore, holding up a hand commandingly. "Don't say another word! You've got all you want, Selena, all you could ever need." He cast his eyes around the sumptuously furnished room.

"You're a son of the devil!" she spat at him, sliding her long legs over the edge of the bed and slipping into her peach silk robe. Walking towards him with the edges hanging loose to expose her voluptuous curves she touched a finger to his mouth, letting it linger on his bottom lip.

"That's no news, Selena." He lifted his arms in a nonchalant shrug. "Always have been. I can't change now any more than you can. Let it be."

"Who is it?" she asked, her lips curling.

"Who is what?"

"The woman?" Her brows arched and there was a spiteful gleam in her almond-shaped eyes. He'd always been aware that she had a vicious streak in her, despite the great lengths she always went to to project a persona of sweetness and charm.

"Why do women always presume to know what the answers are." He turned for the door again. She put a restraining hand on his arm. His muscles clenched.

"Come now, Tiger, don't take me for a fool. You are not the kind of man to go without a woman in your bed for any length of time. There has to be someone else."

"Does there?" He gently removed her hand, glancing at the bountiful breasts now heaving with suppressed anger, the smooth line of her ivory hips, the graceful curve of her waistline. "If there is that is my business and mine alone, Selena." She had successfully put the final nail in the coffin.

"I'll get even with you for this, Tiger Carstairs!" Her slim pale hands clenched into fists, and for a moment he thought she might throw caution to the winds and rake his cheek with the talons she'd used many times to excite him in bed.

"Oh, Selena, darling!" His sigh was exaggerated as he ran a finger down one of her flushed cheeks. "Don't get melodramatic, please. We've had some good times together. You're a woman of the world and knew the way of the game. Let's not spoil what we've shared."

"I'll find out who it is, and make her pay!" Her eyes narrowed with menace, and for a moment she looked more than her age, the lines about

her eyes and mouth more pronounced.

"Do that, and you'll rue the day." With that steely summation he pointed a finger at her, opened the door and walked out.

Tiger paused fractionally as she slammed it so hard behind him the walls seemed to vibrate. He went through the front door with his back rigid, then heard her yelling like a wharfside doxie for her maid as he reached for Satan's reins.

There was a bitter taste in his mouth as he rode home. Your trouble, Timothy Carstairs, he rebuked himself, is you're too soft in the centre. Never did like hurting a female. If it had been any other woman he would likely have had little regret about ending the affair. But Selena, for all her sharp words, had been a fine mistress, meeting his every need with a fervour that matched his own.

Was he a fool? Perhaps. Too late now for going back. The matter had been drawing to a head for months now, ever since a certain red-haired shrew had entered his life and turned it around. Closing his eyes he let Satan find his own way home.

The little wench had felt so soft, so womanly in his arms that one time he'd held her. Her curves were not as luscious as Selena's, her legs not as long, and her face nowhere near as beautiful, so why did his every waking thought settle on her?

Was it the way she stirred his protective instincts and brought out something essentially masculine in him? She was his property, after all. His to sample any time he chose. He laughed out loud at that bit of foolishness. What an assumption. She'd likely go for him with a carving knife if he tried to bed her. Mind you, the little chit wasn't immune to him; he'd proved that much. He sighed, still able to feel her pliant softness beneath his hands. Tiger groaned as desire rose up in him, strong and deep. Then he called himself all the fools. Thelma would kill him if he took liberties with the girl. And likely demand he wed her.

The marriage trap was one he had thought seriously about lately. Truth was, a man with his background had a very well defined path to tread here in the colony. His aim was to find himself a presentable female from the upper echelon. Looks meant little; it was the title and position he was after. Since his arrival, his burning ambition, after making a fortune, had been to walk the hallowed paths the nobs trod. And the only way for him to achieve that goal was by marrying into the gentry.

So he'd do well to keep his lecherous leanings towards the red-haired witch under control.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Don't be daft, girl, of course you'll go." Thelma gave Isabella an arch look before bending to her sewing.

Isabella scowled at Tiger's broad back. "I thought I had a choice in what I did. That's what I was told soon after I came here. As long as I did my work and didn't cause any trouble then I was free to do as I wish."

Tiger stood at the dresser, his eyes on a book, apparently ignoring the conversation. But when he turned and she saw that his scowl echoed her own, she knew he was aware of everything she had said.

"I'm still your owner, little tartar, and if I say you will accompany me to the Governor's Christmas ball, then you will accompany me."

"That's what you think!"

His golden brows shot up. "You must be a few brains short, woman. 'Tis well known that the Governor takes pride in being a staunch believer in allowing the cons to rub shoulders with the free settlers. He's made many enemies by supporting the emancipists. Most of the convict women in Sydney would give their right arm to be allowed to go to a ball at Government House."

"Well, I'm not them, am I?" Isabella got up and lifted the hem of her skirt a fraction so she could shake her misshapen foot at him. "They can give their right arm, an' they'd still be able to cavort with the fine ladies and gents, wouldn't they? But with my lame foot I'll only show you up."

Tiger dropped his gaze to the wiggling foot, then brought it up to her flushed face. "Aha, so 'tis only that that's stopping you, is it, eh?"

"Not only that. I can't dance. And I'd look pretty silly wouldn't I, standing about like a dummy while all the others are prancing about." With a stubborn tilt to her head, she plunked down on the chair.

There was another reason she wouldn't go. He had only thought of her because he wasn't taking his mistress. Though why he couldn't take his fancy paramour she didn't know. From what she'd seen of Selena Drake the woman was fit to mingle in any company. She was beautiful, and obviously able to deck herself out in all the finery, for the gown she'd worn on the occasion Isabella had seen her was enough to make a person's mouth water. Isabella had pestered Thelma for her identity in church one Sunday after she'd noticed the nob's wives and daughters giving the woman a wide berth. Could that be the reason Tiger wasn't

taking her to the ball this year? Although if it was, it was a rare thing for him to worry about what others thought.

"I'll teach you to dance. 'Tis the most simple thing in the world." He came to stand over her, his arrogant stance intimidating.

"I don't wish to." Isabella bit her lip, lowering her head to hide the yearning filling her. She knew she sounded like an ungracious trollop, but couldn't help herself.

"Must I keep repeating myself! You have no say in it."

Isabella felt sure she heard him grind his teeth.

Tiger heard Thelma's intake of breath and caught her look of condemnation. He winked and gave her a sly smile.

He wondered briefly why he was bothering. The Irish termagant didn't deserve the time of day. So why was he pursuing it? Because he was a stubborn, stupid half-wit, that's why.

Selena had put great store in going to the Governor's ball. She had been his only bed companion for two years. At thirty-five she was still able to draw the eyes of most men in the colony, but Tiger had no regrets about ending their liaison.

"I'll teach you to dance," he said to Isabella. Now why had he said that? The sun must have got to him. He shook his head, grimacing when Thelma gave him an approving nod.

"Even if I could dance, I've got nothing to wear." Isabella pressed her fingers over her knees, straightening the skirt of her plain calico dress.

Tiger gave a long-suffering sigh. "What do you take me for, woman? If I'm taking you to the ball it goes without saying that I'll make sure you don't show me up or yourself. All right?"

"Why are you doing this? Thelma, why is he doing this? He knows he'd sooner take ..." She bit her lip.

"Who I take is my affair and nobody else's!" Tiger cursed under his breath. Running a hand through his hair he glared at every one in the kitchen. "I'm going out. I'll not ask again." With a snort of impatience he strode out.

"You ought to go with him, Bella," Dougal said. Isabella saw his mouth turn down at the corners and knew that the last thing he wanted was for her to go anywhere with Tiger, let alone to a ball at Government House. His knuckles were white where he'd clenched his fingers.

"Why, just because he's the lord and master. He doesn't own me, Dougal!"

"He does, Bella," Dougal reminded her.

Isabella pressed her lips together defiantly.

"Dougal's right, Bella. You shouldn't miss such an opportunity," Thelma agreed, and Ginger nodded, waving his pipe up and down along with his head.

"But I don't know how to move, talk or act among gentry, Thelma. I'll make an idiot of myself. He'll wish to goodness he hadn't asked me." Isabella stared at her hands. Perhaps that's what she should do, go and show him up. Why had he asked her? The question nagged at her.

"He offered to teach you to dance. Don't throw his offer back down his throat. And as for them being gentry, that's rubbish. The Governor has a habit of asking ex convicts to his house. He likes to rub the noses of the free settlers in it. They think they're too good to mix with the likes of us. If you let this opportunity pass you'll live to regret it." Thelma pushed herself out of the chair and stood up slowly. "Anyway, I'm off to bed." Folding her sewing she put it in the basket on the dresser. "Night all."

"I'll come with you, love." Ginger also rose. "Put out the lamps, Dougal, will you. Just leave one on for Tiger. Goodnight." He followed Thelma out.

A wind had sprung up earlier. The door and windows were open wide to let as much cool air in as possible, and a gust sent leaves swirling across the floor. Aimlessly Isabella picked up the broom to sweep them out.

"Who would have thought nine months ago that you'd be getting an invite to the Governor's ball, eh, Bella?" Dougal sat twisting a piece of twine in his fingers. "I wish I could take you. I wish I could do all the things Tiger does."

"Tsh, Tiger, Tiger!" Isabella thumped the broom against the wall. "What's so grand about the things he does, eh? He tells a load of stories and pretends he's something he's not. And why do you want to do what he does? You want to get a fancy mistress and set her up in a fine house with a parlour, eh? Well, go ahead, what's to stop you? You're a free man, go off on your own and make a fortune same as he has. Perhaps he'll teach you how to gamble!" Isabella limped over to the door. "I'm going out to the privy. I can't stand to listen to all the praises you heap on him." She pushed her dress away from her neck and sighed, wiping perspiration from her face on her apron hem.

"Bella! I should have thought by now you'd realise how well off we

are here. I couldn't make my way as he's done, and you know it. Some of us were made to work for someone all our lives. I don't have what it needs to strike out on my own. I still shudder sometimes when I think of what life might have been like if Tiger hadn't stepped in and spoken for us. You could have ended up with Malloy. And I could have ended up working with the sheep, alone somewhere with only the animals to talk to, until I went mad like some of the shepherds do out there alone for weeks on end." He did shudder then, as he went to snuff out the candles in two of the lamps.

Isabella sighed. "You're right, Dougal." No good arguing against his logic. She knew how well off she was. "Goodnight." With her hand on the door-frame she smiled at him.

Dougal walked over to stand in front of her. By the light of the one candle she saw the glimmer in his eye and knew it for what it was. He put a hand on her arm and his head bent to hers.

Isabella drew back sharply, seeing the disappointment clear in his eyes. How she wished she could return his feelings, but she just couldn't.

"Bella?" There was a wealth of yearning in the one word.

"Oh, Dougal, let's not change things, eh?" Isabella gave a shuddery sigh. "You're a dear friend to me, an' I'll always be grateful to you. But ..."

In a rare show of temper he pushed her away. "Grateful! It's not your gratitude I'm after, Bella, an' you know it! I see the way the land lies. An' you're barking up the wrong tree, same as me. He's got his eyes set firmly on marrying one of the nob's daughters. If you think he's ever going to look at you as anything more than an Irish biddy who works for him, you're sadly mistaken!"

"You don't know what you're talking about, Dougal! What a load of rubbish. What would I have feelings for that Englishman for? You know as well as me that I wouldn't give him the time of day."

"Bella, Bella." He drew in a long sad breath then let it out slowly, touching her cheek with a finger. She backed away and he swore under his breath. "I've got eyes in my head. I've seen the way your eyes follow him around. Seen the way you wait for him to throw you a kind word or a fleeting look. I'm surprised you didn't jump at the offer to go with him to the ball; you've been begging him to look your way."

"You're mad!" Cheeks glowing, she pushed at him with both hands. "I don't know where you get your ideas. Just because I can't have

deeper feelings for you, you think I hanker after him."

"I'm no madder than you. An' let me tell you this, Bella, don't expect me to be here to pick up the pieces when you fall apart."

Rarely had she seen him show his anger. The veins in his temples stood out and his thick neck was taut. Isabella pushed past him and fled to the privy. What had come over Dougal? Her dear friend was turning against her.

In her room she pulled on her nightgown, then restlessly prowled about. Perhaps what had annoyed her most about Dougal's outburst was the grain of truth in his words. She hadn't wanted to upset Dougal. Why did he have to be so possessive? He would always hold a special place in her heart, but she could never see him as a lover, could never see herself spending the rest of her life sharing heartaches and precious moments with him. No, when her mind recklessly allowed itself to wander down forbidden paths, the shadowy figure who always shared her most intimate thoughts, yearnings and hopes had a mane of gold and flashing eyes the colour of the same precious metal.

"Idiot!" She pulled the pins from her hair and began to brush it. With a sensuous movement she lifted it from her shoulders and let it slide through her fingers. Funny how the length of one's hair had such a remarkable effect on how you felt. For the first few months here she had felt no different from the boy she knew she resembled with her cropped hair and bony figure. Now she imagined herself to be almost voluptuous, with her rounded shape and her longer tresses. Her hair shone now as it never had. Taking a clump she touched it to her lips, loving the silky slide of it over them.

With an impatient shrug she tossed the brush down on the bed and threw her hair back. Dragging in a long breath she went to stare into the speckled mirror on the small bedside chest. Plain, that was what she was. Why fool herself, she would probably end up with Dougal, for he was the only man who would ever spare her the time of day, apart from those who only had lustful thoughts and would try to take any female they could. Tiger Carstairs was heading for the top of the social ladder. Likely she would do the same in his shoes.

The others were right, she was ungrateful. Any girl in her right mind would take Dougal and thank their stars they had a good man who worshipped them and was willing to do anything for them. But deep down she knew that if she gave Dougal what he wanted, the day would come when he would hate her.

It was stifling in here, the ceiling and walls closing in on her. She had never felt less like sleep in her life. Some strange emotion was eating at her, making her restless and dissatisfied.

Easing the door open she went into the dim kitchen. It would be nice to go outside, to walk in the darkness alone, but Dougal would see her, and she had no desire to meet him again this night. And even after nine months in this new land she still had a fear of the many odd creatures roaming here. Only last week Tiger had killed a snake that had found its way into the kitchen, petrifying her and Thelma.

Standing near the window she stared out at the big white oval of a moon. It sent eerie shadows slanting over the yard, turning the familiar garden into a place of mystery.

Sighing, she rubbed her hands up and down her arms, then went to sit in the chair that Tiger had made his own. Smoothing her palms over the armrests Isabella pulled her feet beneath her and rested her head back. She yawned, then closed her eyes. Beneath her dropped lids she imagined his strong body beneath hers, could almost feel his muscled arms about her as he cradled her close to his hard chest.

Isabella jerked her eyes open, wondering what had woken her. Tilting her head, she heard one of the dogs softly whining outside the door. Better get to her room. The last thing she wanted was Tiger coming in to find her in his chair.

She had one foot to the floor when the door opened and the man who'd been occupying her thoughts entered. He reared back in surprise when he caught sight of her halfway out of his chair.

"Well, well, did you wait up for me?" he drawled, his voice as smooth and soft as honey.

"I couldn't sleep."

Tiger watched in amusement as her chin went up. What on earth was the chit doing out here at this time of night, in her night shift too? And a pretty sight she made in it. He'd obviously awakened her, for her eyes still had a drowsy look that he found immensely provocative.

"Do you make a habit of wandering about in the middle of the night?" He took his hat off and set it on the peg behind the door.

"I'm not wandering about. I'm sitting," she said with a toss of the head that sent her silken hair swirling.

Tiger swallowed. The red tresses were always half hidden beneath her cap. He'd rarely seen her hair uncovered, and certainly not loose, since the night he'd rescued her. The shiny locks had grown so much.

His fingers itched to touch it, to see if the strands felt as smooth and silky as they looked. He clasped his hands behind his back.

She was standing now, quite wide awake and preparing to scamper back to her hole like a frightened animal. Tiger sauntered across the room, putting himself in line with her bedroom door. She would have to pass him to reach her sanctuary. "Perhaps you waited up for your dancing lessons, hmm?" Suppressing a grin he eyed her up and down, knowing she cringed beneath his scrutiny.

"I don't want any lessons. I won't be needing them."

Her defiance annoyed him. He lifted his brows and gave her the look Selena had often told him shouted insolence.

Tiger moved closer, stalking her as she sidled along the side of the table. He felt rather like a tiger hunting a fawn, for that was what she looked like with her shadowed eyes and furrowed brow.

"I wish to take you to the ball, miss. You will dance with me if I have to tie you to my body." He rushed forward when she made to dart past him.

They both froze in shock when he brought her slender body up against his hard one. She whimpered. Tiger swallowed an oath.

"Bella," he muttered, shaking his head. "Why do you fight me? I'll never hurt you, you know." His fingers loosened on her arms, but he didn't release her. There was something almost heavenly about her, standing close so him in the gown that covered her from neck to ankle, yet revealed her shape as if it had been fashioned to lure a man. His pulse began to beat a steady rhythm he knew well as her full breasts pushed against the soft material, lightly brushing his shirt front.

"Yes you will," she said, not knowing where that piece of knowledge sprung from. But instinctively she knew that this man could hurt her more than any other living soul. It was up to her never to give him the means to break her heart.

"What makes you say that? You know deep down I'd never do anything to hurt anyone I consider part of my family. And you are that now."

"No I'm not!" Frantically Isabella tried to free herself. Her body was reacting to his nearness in a way she knew he sensed.

"As long as you are in my care you are." He lowered his head until his nose was level with hers and their eyes met. For one moment she thought he was going to kiss her; longed for it even while she dreaded what it would do to her.

"We have no one else, Bella, you and I. Your family's so far gone from you they may as well be dead, and mine are dead. We are each other's world now. You belong to me."

"Oh no!" She shook her head. "I may be your servant, and your property as long as I have my term to serve, but you'll never own me body and soul, Tiger Carstairs!" She out-stared him, although every instinct told her to back away from the gleam in those penetrating eyes.

"One day you will see how false those words are, Bella O'Shea."

"Why are you doing this to me?" She moved back a pace. She might as well have saved her energy for he merely moved to close to her that she could feel his breath on her face.

"Doing what? All I asked is that you attend a ball with me. Let me tell you, Bella, I think you're mighty strange to refuse such an offer." His hands went to her shoulders and squeezed. She jumped, her skin tingling.

"That's my point, you think me odd. So why insist I go with you?" She tried to shrug his hands off, but he just increased the pressure.

Tiger stared hard at her. "You're a very beautiful woman, Bella. What man wouldn't want to be seen with you on his arm?"

"Don't," she whispered, dropping her head. "I'm plain. I have a limp. I'm common and ordinary." She pulled back when he suddenly slid his hands to her wrists and jerked them towards his body. He pressed them against his chest and she could feel the steady thump of his heart. Something deep inside her began to quiver.

"You're a fool if you believe that, Bella. There's a certain charm about your looks that make men give you more than a second glance. You're courageous and plucky, and very unordinary."

"Now." His eyes grew serious. "We can carry on fighting over this, or we can do it my way. But teach you to dance I will."

Isabella sighed and let her shoulders droop. She knew when she was beaten. Why not have the pleasure of a few stolen moments in his arms? He'd soon enough get tired of this game he was playing and when he found out she was a useless dancer he'd be thankful she had the sense to refuse to go to the ball with him.

"Now." He put her left hand on his shoulder, then took her right hand and held it lightly. He placed his hand in the middle of her back. The heat of his skin through the thin fabric of her gown made her gasp and look down.

"But I'm wearing my nightgown," she whispered, shaken by the

strength of the sensations that raked through her.

"So you are," he murmured, his voice sending a tremor up her spine. He loosened his grip and grinned wickedly down at her. "We'll pretend it's a fine gown such as you'll be wearing on the night of the ball. Now concentrate, let yourself relax and follow the movements of my body, right?" He waited for her to give him a minuscule nod before going on, "When I move my legs you move with me. Remember that I will not let you go, so if you wish to run to your bed tonight you must at least learn the rudiments of the steps. Right? Right?" he repeated when she remained silent.

"Seems I have no say in it, do I?" she muttered, lips compressed.

"You're learning, little one," he drawled, his lips quirking as he began to turn, taking her with him in a small twist to one side.

Isabella stumbled over one of his feet, almost sobbing in frustration. Not only did she have the humiliation of not being able to follow his movements but her body was reacting in the strangest way to the closeness of his. A heat was pooling low in her stomach and her breasts felt heavy. With a groan of self-disgust she tried to break free.

"We haven't even started," he said, his mouth level with her ear. "You aren't relaxing, are you?" His breath was warm as it drifted over her earlobe and neck. She shivered and he chuckled.

She would have punched him if she thought he wouldn't take his own kind of retribution.

"I can't," she insisted, lifting her head to glare up at him.

"No such word in my vocabulary."

"Maybe not, but you haven't got a crippled foot, have you?"

"'Tis all in the mind, Bella. Don't do this to yourself, woman. You've got such courage. For once in your life own up that I'm right. You want to go to the ball so much it's an ache deep inside you. I bet you can almost taste it, eh? I know what it's like to be an outsider, don't forget. Perhaps that's what I see in you that makes me determined to have my way about this. You want to reach the moon and grab the stars. Go along with me and together we'll make dreams come true."

Isabella could find no words to answer. Perhaps he was drunk. But his breath smelt sweet, with barely a hint of rum on it. "Why do you say these things to me?" she whispered, her eyes shadowed. "I don't understand you."

"Perhaps I don't understand myself, Bella. Let's dance. You'll not get to bed this night until you've mastered a simple waltz."

"Arrogant Englishman!" she breathed into his shirtfront.

"Aye." He laughed again, then began to move. Isabella allowed him to lead where he wanted, and to her great surprise she began to follow his movements.

"See, didn't I tell you it was simple," he remarked a while later when Isabella had been moving to inner music. "You've done this before, you have a natural rhythm."

"Aye, when I was a little one my Mother and Papa used to dance sometimes, then he would show me how to do the steps. He promised me that when I grew up a fine gentleman would one day take me to a ball where everyone would stop to watch me dance."

"There you are, then, his promise is going to come true. Only difference is that I'm not a grand gentleman." Tiger lifted her chin with a finger and saw the tears glistening in her eyes. With a thumb he smoothed one away as it trickled from a corner.

"And the only ones who'll stop to watch me will be laughing at the fool who thinks to dance with a lame foot!"

"Bella! Stop that," he scolded. "One thing I can't abide is self-pity! You've more gumption than that."

She sighed, allowing him to lead her again.

"Tell me about your mother and father," he asked after a small silence when all that could be heard was the shuffling of their feet.

She smiled pensively. "Papa used to watch Ma at times as if he couldn't quite believe his luck. Every man of class would have wanted to dance with her if she'd been a lady of quality. That English swine should have made her his wife!" Tiger felt her go stiff with remembered resentment.

"And if he had you'd never have known your stepfather. 'Tis likely the English gent would have ill treated her and left her to rot in his great mansion while he dallied with his mistress or any maid who took his fancy. Men like that never change."

"Yes. No doubt you know all about the type."

"I know as much about them as any other poor boy who had to live by his wits."

"Did you live in London afore you were transported?"

"Aye. I was born in Kent. But my mother died at my birth, so Dad upped and took me to London." He gave a mirthless laugh. "He was going to make his fortune! 'Twas him who taught me to cheat at the gaming table afore I was this high." He gestured with a palm at his thigh.

"I guess he taught me how to fend for myself, which put me in good stead for when I was sent out here as a green lad with no sense and no trade." Staring over her shoulder Tiger looked down long-forgotten pathways to the past.

"What was it like when you came here?"

He smiled down at her. "Well now, in those days men and women were packed together like so much useless cargo on the ships. It would take a while to tell of the horrors I saw. One man was lost overboard. Some fool went below and left a candle burning. It set a bag of rice to smouldering and the smoke sent everybody scuttling around like hens with their heads cut off. All except us poor fools who were locked below. If I live to be ninety, Bella, I'll never forget what it felt like to be chained below with fire threatening to set the ship ablaze." He swallowed, closing his eyes.

"We arrived to a colony that was little better than a hellhole. Flogging was common."

"Were you ever flogged?" she asked in a whisper. The thought of his beautiful body being so ill-used made her feel faint.

"Not me, but many were. Some got up to five hundred lashes for stealing and others went about in leg irons for months on end. We English who were transported divided into two groups. I was a yokel and we would always be fighting with the townies who thought we had no more sense than sheep. The Irish set themselves up into three groups. They had the Cork Boys, Dublin Boys, and the North Boys." He grinned. "They all rushed into a fight until no one was sure who was fighting who."

"How did you get the name Tiger? It can't be the name you was baptised with."

"Aye, you're right. Captain Tate, who's a very good friend of mine, he gave me that title." He smiled reminiscently. "I was a tow-haired brat with this tangled mane flying about halfway down my back. He pulled me out of a spot of bother one day and reckoned I looked like a wild cat, and I guess I was in those days. The name stuck."

"What's your real name then? The one you were given at your birth?"

For a while he looked down at her, his eyes narrowed and speculative. "'Tis Timothy. But don't you go telling anybody. 'Tis so long since I was called it that if anyone was to call it now I would never answer."

"I won't tell a soul."

They had long since stopped dancing, and with a shock Isabella realised Tiger was leaning back relaxed against the table edge. And she was between his knees, held gently by his hands on her hips. She looked up and caught a strange glint in his eyes.

"I'd best get to my bed, then," she said, knowing it was the last thing she wanted to do. It felt so good, so safe, yet so exciting to be this near him. It was as if they had stood thus a thousand times; as if her slender body was made to be surrounded by his strength.

His eyes met hers, and he bent his head until his mouth hovered above her own. The warmth of his breath sent tingles over her skin. But then he seemed to come to a decision and with an abrupt movement almost lifted her off her feet as he put her away from him.

"Aye, off to your bed, and no more talk of not coming to the ball with me, d'you hear?" There was a gruff note in his voice that she didn't understand.

"Yes, I mean no," she mumbled and fled to her room.

Tiger stood for long minutes staring at her door. Shaking his head, he pushed himself away from the table and slowly went to his room. It had been a long time since he'd disclosed so much about his past. The wench had an unnerving effect on him. Lord above, for a minute there he'd almost dragged her into his arms and kissed her. She'd certainly been inviting it with her eyes. And her body had shown its eagerness for his touch; had been screaming for it, in fact. Ye gods! The woman was a contradiction; a siren luring him on, yet despite all that she'd been through there was an innocent air about her that fascinated him.

Sitting down to pull off his boots, he heard her moving about next door. He swallowed a groan and yanked his boots back on and strode out of the house.

For an age he stood leaning on the fence, gazing out over his land, filled with a restless yearning he'd never experienced before in his life. It was unsettling, and something that didn't appeal to him at all.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"I can't do this!"

Isabella stared at feet covered in the softest leather slippers she'd ever seen, let alone worn. Tiger had taken her into town and ordered the cobbler to make them to suit her. He'd fashioned them so well she hardly knew her toes were misshapen.

"He's making a fool of me, Thelma," she moaned. "Why did you let him talk me into this?"

Thelma gave her a gentle tap on the shoulder. "Don't be a dimwit. You'll be the belle of the ball."

"The Bella of the ball," Ginger agreed from his chair.

"Oh yes! With all those nobles there, I'm going to be the belle!" Isabella pulled her mouth down at the corners. "I'll fall over my stupid feet an' this fancy skirt will likely trip me up. That'll teach him!" She took a handful of the soft muslin in her fist and shook it.

"It will not. The dressmaker made it long enough to cover your feet an' just short enough to allow you room to move. You look a picture, dear." Thelma fussed about, straightening the skirt of the gown of pale apple green. "And your hair's a treat fashioned on the top of your head like that."

Isabella touched the few tendrils curling over her ears. Thelma had painstakingly placed silk flowers amid the soft folds of her hair.

"I feel I'm about to pop out at any minute. I'm frightened to breathe too deep." Isabella touched the curve of her breast above the low scooped neckline.

More silk rosebuds nestled in the pleats at the shoulders and centre front, and for all her complaints she relished the softness of the material. It caressed her skin, the petticoats beneath softly rustling and swirling about her legs when she moved. Never had she expected to be wearing such a gown. When she recalled the rags that had been all she'd ever known her throat tightened with emotion.

"It's the fashion. You wouldn't want Tiger to feel ashamed of you, would you? If you went on his arm in a gown that wasn't fashionable you'd be a laughing stock, an' so would he." Thelma raised her eyes to the ceiling. "Now, just remember, follow Tiger's lead. Hang onto him an' let him show you who to talk to an' who to ignore. An' above all have a grand time." She sighed. "I feel like a mother sending her daughter out

to her first ball."

Isabella put an arm about her shoulders. "And I feel as if I'm your daughter agoing." She'd heard from her mother only a week ago, and the news was all bad. Her Papa had died in Newgate, and her youngest sister had died of a fever soon after Isabella's transportation. Her two eldest brothers were caught stealing and one was in Newgate and the other on the Thames. That had been the lowest ebb of her life, after reading it. If not for Thelma's support she would have felt like dying.

The door to Tiger's room opened. Isabella sucked in her breath. She couldn't go through with this. Not when he looked like every young girl's wildest dream. Beige breeches hugged his muscular thighs and his ebony boots were polished until you could see your face in them. The thatch of golden hair had been tamed, drawn back with a black bow at his nape. The shirt of pure white beneath his cutaway jacket had tiny flounces down each side of the front and must be new, for she'd not laundered one such as that. In his cravat a gold pin set off the golden light in his eyes as they surveyed her.

Isabella had never felt so inadequate. "That's it, I'm not going," she blurted, swirling to run to her bedroom door.

Tiger was too quick for her. Grabbing her arm he said softly, "And why, pray, did you make this decision? You look beautiful."

It was the stark truth. Tiger couldn't believe the transformation. He'd never seen the pure line of her throat and upper breasts before, and the short puff of the sleeves showed off her slender arms. She was the picture of femininity, angelic, yet invitingly sensuous.

"You don't have to lie." She stared at his boots as if she found them of great interest.

Tiger shook her arm gently. "You should know by now that I never lie." He glanced around at the others. "She looks a fetching picture, does she not, Thelma? Dougal?"

Dougal, who'd just entered the kitchen, stood by the door, a strange expression on his face. He looked dumbstruck. Tiger felt sorry for the man; more than sorry, at the open longing in Dougal's eyes.

Thelma went to him and patted his arm. He said something low to her, and she squeezed his hand.

"Yes, a picture," Dougal finally agreed, his voice strained. He coughed and swallowed. "You'll be the envy of all the women, Bella, that's for sure."

"Come, 'tis time to go." Tiger motioned to Isabella. "No time for

second thoughts. I'm not about to let all those lessons go to waste. Don't wait up for us," he turned to tell the others as he ushered Isabella ahead of him. She hesitated briefly near Dougal, smiling at him, and he gave her a small nod before she went out.

As they went down the path she was acutely aware of Tiger's hand at her elbow. Suddenly shy, Isabella was certain she'd never get through this night. "This evening will be a disaster," she murmured.

He laughed. "Only if you let it be. Where's your spirit, woman? This is your chance to prove you are as good as every other female in this godforsaken place. You'll outshine most of them. You have naught to be ashamed of."

Isabella glanced up at him. Heavens! Now she had his high opinion to live up to. What if she let him down? Then not only would she be humiliated, but she'd have his scorn on top of all else. She caught sight of the four wheeled buggy parked outside the gate, a splendid white horse in the shafts, and all other thoughts fled.

"Where did that come from?" She lifted a hand to point, her throat suddenly dry.

"Do you like it? I reckoned that for your first ball you deserved something better than the old wagon pulled by the gelding. Come on, up you get."

Before she could say another word he placed his hands on her waist and with easy grace lifted her. Isabella had to put her hands on his shoulders to steady herself before she could sit back on the padded leather seat. Her heart began to hammer as she looked everywhere but into his eyes.

"If it rains or the wind blows up we have the hood for protection. And we don't want the dust along the road spoiling your delightful gown, do we?" He looked up to where pink and red streaks coloured the sky and a few puffy clouds billowed. "Though by the looks of it the Governor has a mighty fine night for his ball."

"So that's where Dougal went. To fetch this rig." She ran a hand wonderingly over the polished seat and leather bindings.

"Aye. Now, let's go to the party, eh?" He grinned as he took up the reins and clicked his tongue. "'Tis a good thing the night is fine, Bella, else your fancy hair arrangement would get spoiled. Did I mention it looks grand piled up like that?"

"No." She put a hand selfconsciously to the curls over her ear.

The cockatoos squawked as the rig bowled gaily past. The well-

known scenery and wildlife took on a feeling of unreality, as if they were moving into a strange new territory.

Tiger took them along Macquarie Street, past the Rum Hospital. So called, he'd said, because the Governor had contracted the head surgeon and two men of business to build it with the right to import spirits instead of taking payment in cash.

Isabella gasped when Government House came into view. Darkness was beginning to fall and the brightly lit house reminded her of a story her mother had told her long ago about a princess who'd lived in a tower made of glass.

Of course she'd seen the grand mansion from a distance, but tonight it added to the dreamlike quality of everything. Like a child receiving a surprise gift, she smiled and clapped her hands together in pleasure as they neared the gardens. Guards stood to attention, their weapons perched on their shoulders.

"That's better," Tiger commented, his eyes twinkling.

"What?" Isabella tipped her head. They'd travelled in silence for most of the journey.

"I was beginning to think you'd be glowering all evening. You should smile more often, Bella."

"I suppose you're going to tell me it makes me look more beautiful," she retorted.

"As a matter of fact it does," he told her agreeably.

Isabella made a soft deprecating sound in her throat.

"Why do you always do that, Bella? One day I'll convince you of your own worth."

She kept quiet. His compliments confused her.

"The house looks wonderful, doesn't it?" she asked instead, and he cocked an eyebrow, completely aware of her change of subject.

Tiger manoeuvred the rig between the rows of carriages, buggies, gigs and phaetons and passed the reins to a waiting boy. Tossing the lad a coin, he jumped down then turned to assist Isabella. She was trembling as he lowered her to the ground.

"Nervous?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she whispered, touching the tendrils of hair at her temple.

Tiger covered her hand with his. "Leave it. It looks fine." He smiled down at her. "Do you know that's the first time since we met that you've been truly honest with me." He leant close and whispered in her ear, "Well, I have a confession to make. I'm nervous too."

"You! Don't tell tales. You've never been nervous in your life!"

"That's what you think. I may put on a good show of it now. Enough to convince people that I'm brash and confident, but that's what it is: a good show."

"You convince people you're brash and confident because you are. I reckon you were self-satisfied in your cot."

"No, Bella my girl. I have my insecurities same as everyone else." He put her gloved hand in the crook of his arm and led her along the path to the front entrance where they joined the queue of guests.

Lights spilled from the long ground floor windows, illuminating the courtyard. Footmen in matching uniforms of blue with gold trimmings, and fancy powdered wigs, stood waiting stiffly by the door, full of their own importance. One took the invitation card Tiger drew out of his inside jacket pocket. He stared at it, nodded once, then gave both of them a thorough perusal before telling them to go in.

Tiger concealed his amusement as Isabella's eyes wandered over the great hall. She was obviously fascinated, her eyes brilliant. Something else besides laughter leapt to life inside him at her innocent enjoyment. How long had it been since he'd experienced such naïve pleasure? Perhaps he never had; his experiences had made him too cynical. It was a wonder hers hadn't tainted her in the same way, but she still preserved an almost childlike quality that only revealed itself at times like this.

Giant pots held sprigs of banksia and wattle, some hung with fancy baubles. Everywhere were wall hangings of the finest fabrics and tapestries depicting winter scenes to remind everyone of Christmases in a colder land; a land where snow covered the ground during the festive season, and holly, pine, and mistletoe decorated the halls, instead of these native plants. Wooden bells and stars and painted carved animals dangled from the ceiling beams.

Tiger had seen it all before but it was new to Isabella. She let out a soft, "Oh," then turned her attention to the other guests. The women wore splendid gowns of silk, velvet and lace, the men were decked out in their finery.

"It's all so..." Words apparently, for once, failed her. Tiger touched the small hand on his arm. She was gripping him as if frightened he'd disappear if she let go. Her eyes rapt, she feasted on every detail.

"A bit daunting, eh?" Tiger led her forward until they were in the line waiting to meet the Governor. She was shaking again, and when he looked down saw a tremor in her bottom lip. But she lifted her chin, and

pride filled him.

"That's my Bella," he bent to whisper as they inched forward. She sent him a tremulous smile and he pressed her hand against his side, watching the expression in her eyes change to wariness at this show of possessiveness.

"Mister Carstairs and Mistress Isabella O'Shea," the footman bellowed as they reached the front of the queue.

Governor Macquarie smiled benignly as he shook Tiger's hand. "Good to see you again, Carstairs," he said.

"Sir." Tiger bowed. "I trust you are keeping well, Governor."

"Fit as can be, my good man." The Governor turned to Isabella. "Welcome to Government House, Mistress O'Shea. I trust you will enjoy yourself."

"Thank you, Your Excellency. I'm sure I will." Isabella curtsied before the Governor as Thelma had taught her. Then her bemusement increased as she was introduced to his wife. Elizabeth Macquarie wore a dress of black velvet, its scooped neckline trimmed with a white flounce. Around her neck she wore a necklace of diamonds, a fortune in precious stones.

"How is your son, madam?" Isabella asked. Thelma had prompted the question. The entire colony was aware of the Macquarie's pride in their boy, a pride magnified because their first child had died at three months, before Lachlan Macquarie had been appointed Governor.

"How sweet of you to ask," Elizabeth Macquarie answered with a smile. "Lachlan is my great joy. He has known his letters for more than a year now, since he was three years old. I am convinced he will be a great scholar."

"I'm sure he will, madam" Isabella agreed, then Tiger moved her smoothly on.

"I can't believe I really met the Governor and his wife," she whispered.

"You really did," he said. There was a teasing light in his eyes that sent her pulses reeling. "Come, let's dance," he offered as they entered the ballroom.

Draperies of deep blue dropped in lush folds at the long windows, secured by golden ropes with heavily tasselled ends. The plush padding on the gold legged chairs and sofas arranged around the sides of the immense room was of the same colour.

A quartet of musicians was positioned on a small dais in a corner.

They wore matching black jackets over flounced white shirts and black breeches. Isabella vaguely recognised the melody they were playing. Many couples were already waltzing. Tiger had told her about this exciting new dance that had become very popular in Europe recently. She longed to give it a try, even while she shivered with apprehension. The gowns were splendid, their skirts swirling as their partners spun them around. So many silks and muslin, in every conceivable colour, met, meshed then swung apart, reminding her of a kaleidoscope she'd once seen. In their finery and jewels the women exuded a confidence she doubted she would ever feel.

"'Tis better to have this first one with me than to begin with a quadrille where you will be off with other partners," Tiger said, his mouth near her ear. Did he feel the tremors that raced through her?

"No." Isabella's eyes went to the dancers again, then up to him. With a hand at the base of her throat she swallowed the distressing lump threatening to choke her. She had no intention of being off with other partners; the thought of dancing with him was daunting enough.

Ignoring her small denial he led her onto the floor. "Just remember what I taught you. Follow my lead. Don't worry, I will not let you make a fool of either of us, little one."

"Tiger!"

He chuckled softly at her husky whisper. Isabella glanced up at his curved lips.

"Isabella," he murmured, and her eyes widened. He'd never called her that before. She was usually a wench, chit, or biddy, if not Bella.

"Yes?"

"That's the first time you've ever called me Tiger." He stared at her oddly. Isabella ran her tongue over suddenly dry lips at the strange glitter in his eyes.

His hold on her tightened. By now they were in the middle of the great hall, surrounded by other couples, each so engrossed in their own partners that nobody appeared to have the slightest interest in a woman with a limp. That didn't seem half as pronounced this evening either. Isabella presumed the looks that were cast their way were directed at the tall, elegantly dressed man who was deftly guiding her, his paces sure, his demeanour confident. It was as it had been in the kitchen. He led and she followed.

"There, easy isn't it?"

"I think perhaps everything you do is made to appear easy," she

said pertly, and his grin widened.

Isabella didn't want the dance to end, but the music stopped much too soon. "You're always right," she told him with a lift of the chin. It had been so easy she wanted to go on dancing all night.

Tiger led her to the side of the hall, his hand on her elbow as he slowed his gait to match hers. "Come, we'll meet some of my friends," he said. Isabella stifled an urge to escape to the ladies' parlour. Tiger must have sensed her unease for he said softly, "Don't worry. It will be all right."

And when he introduced her, she wondered why she had gone into a panic. Nobody seemed to think it extraordinary that he had brought one of his servants to the ball. In fact after a few minutes of conversation it became clear to Isabella that a good many of the guests were emancipists. This fact was a sore point with the free settlers, who kept themselves apart in their own little clique.

"How they jostle for the opportunity to pass the time with the Governor and his good lady," one man remarked with a smirk.

But Isabella noticed the Governor was totally impartial and spoke easily with every group. "I can't believe he mingles with everyone, no matter their station," she whispered to Tiger.

"Macquarie has upset not a few free settlers with his forward thinking, Bella. He makes no bones about his concept that once a sentence is served, ex convicts should be helped to take part in the growth of the colony. After all, we make up a large percentage of the population. And yon is Thompson. He was made Magistrate, infuriating some. See that fellow there and the man in grey talking to the matron in purple silk." Tiger pointed discreetly, and she nodded. "They're both in public service positions. Caused quite a few squabbles among the so-called gentry too. Even some of the officers in the King's Corps frown on the Governor treating all people in the colony as equals."

"How long since he came here?"

"He's been Governor for nine years come the new year, and he has made his presence felt. He's done great things for the colony, built many fine buildings with Greenway's knowledge. He was responsible for our first bank, and for importing ten thousand pounds' worth of Spanish dollars." Tiger took a coin from his pocket and turned it over in his fingers. "That's where we got our holey dollar from."

"Thelma told me about the way he had the middle punched out of them." Isabella touched it with a finger.

"Aye. And, most important of all, his vision of extending the colony beyond the mountains has become reality." Tiger popped the coin back in his pocket.

"How long before we're to be allowed to move inland, d'you reckon?" one of Tiger's friends asked, overhearing. "Is land to be granted only to the damned Exclusives?"

Isabella knew that was the name given to the free settlers who thought they were a cut above the emancipists.

While Tiger discussed all possibilities with his friend, she watched the proceedings with interest.

When there was a lull in the conversation she commented, "Mrs Macquarie's lovely." She'd been noting how that lady wandered from group to group on her husband's arm, graciously acknowledging everyone.

"Aye, she is. Rumour has it the lady is a lover of bonnets, an' when she wishes the ear of her husband while he is in his office she has been known to toss one of them in. If he sends the bonnet flying out she takes it as a sign that he's busy."

Isabella laughed. "Is this true, sir, or do you tease me?"

"Aye 'tis what I've been told." Tiger nodded seriously, but Isabella noted his eyes twinkled.

"And what if he doesn't toss the bonnet out the door?" she asked.

"Why, then the good lady goes right in, I suppose, and states her business. She's said to be very interested in gardening and agriculture. 'Tis said she brought books with her from Scotland, and has helped her husband plan all the buildings he's had built."

He reached for her hand, tucking it into the crook of his arm again. Isabella shot him a glance of surprise, but he seemed to ignore it, keeping her hand firmly on his arm by placing his own warm one atop it.

"Can't beat a good woman's aid, eh, Tiger?" a man named Perkins commented, nudging the man next to him and winking.

"No doubt a woman has many uses." Tiger grinned down at Isabella. Blushing, she frowned and tried to retrieve her trapped hand, but he refused to relinquish it.

"Heard old Frobisher's getting spliced after the new year." Perkins sighed dramatically. "They get their talons into us one way or another." He shrugged and Isabella shot him a look of disdain, as did the young girl at his side who had been introduced as his cousin from England, recently arrived in the colony.

"What say you, Tiger? When you thinking of taking a wife, eh?" Speculatively he ran his eyes over Isabella.

Tiger looked around. "Seems here in the colony a man has to get himself tied to a woman whether 'tis his fancy or not. I have it in mind to pick one of those prissy young maidens eyeing us to work out which one of us is the better catch."

For a moment Isabella felt quite ill. True, Thelma had acquainted her with Tiger's intentions, and he'd certainly made no secret of his desire to marry a nob's daughter. But stated so bluntly it sent her hopes plummeting. It was sickening that so many women were at this very moment literally ogling the available men. And their eyes rested on Tiger more than any other man present. But why should she be so upset? Tiger wouldn't give her a second thought as far as marriage went. No, one day she would have to face up to the stark truth and settle for second best.

"I reckon our little Prudence Bacon would be about the best choice. What say you, Tiger?" a man named Barclay said snidely, nodding to a young woman in a purple gown that did not flatter her at all. "The wench is due to inherit a tidy sum on her old man's death, which shouldn't be too far into the future, or so I hear. Her Mama is a dragon, but once you get everything signed and sealed you can pack her off back to England out of your way."

Tiger glanced across at the woman under discussion. Isabella gave him a look of disdain and he shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Come, Bella, they are playing a simple reel, let's dance."

"I'm tired." She refused to meet his eyes. They both knew she lied.

"This evening no one is allowed to be tired." Pressing a hand over hers, he nodded to the group at large and escorted her to where the other dancers were forming. Her earlier joyousness had faded and she began to falter, tripping on his feet.

"I don't want to do this," she mumbled.

Tiger merely shrugged. "You're an obstinate little chit, and for once in your life you will just obey me and enjoy yourself," he ordered, grinning down at her so devilishly that she was forced to return his grin with a small one of her own.

"And you're the most insufferably arrogant man it's ever been my misfortune to meet."

"Aye," he agreed. "We do tend to be a bit like the blacksmith with his anvil, don't we? Each sending sparks off the other."

His mouth twisted ruefully, and she concentrated on the wall beyond his shoulder. Right at this moment the sparks flying between them would fair set her alight. But he was set on marrying the likes of Prudence Bacon, so why was she letting him have this effect on her? She was a fool.

"Why aren't you off dancing with the miss in the purple gown who will likely be your bride?"

"Plenty of time," he said, manoeuvring her into a fancy turn. "The night is young."

Isabella's heart sank like a stone. She knew why he had brought her along this night and it had little to do with liking her company. He wanted to court the Miss Prudence Bacon and he couldn't do that if he'd brought his mistress.

When the dance finished he handed Isabella into the care of his friend Barclay, an insipid man with an oversized impression of his own importance, while he danced with the colourless Prudence Bacon. Isabella refused Barclay's invitation to dance. She doubted she would be able to manage one turn around the floor on anyone's arm but Tiger's.

"Would you care to go in for supper now?"

Isabella jumped as Tiger touched her elbow. The man moved with the stealth of the animal he was named after!

Silently she allowed him to escort her into the banquet room, where an array of food was laid out on spotless white linen cloths. From then onwards Tiger remained by her side. Isabella decided she would forget about all the wealthy maidens who watched him avidly. She would pretend that he was hers, if only for this one night. Like a princess allowed one fragment of time with her prince she took each moment and wrapped it into a part of her heart to be taken out and examined once the dream was over.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

All too soon they were in the buggy and Tiger was turning it for home.

They'd passed Hyde Park and the horse was trotting briskly along Elizabeth Street when Isabella could stand the silence between them no longer.

Glancing at him she said softly, "I had a grand time."

"Hate to say it, but I told you so."

"Thank you for being insistent." Isabella took a deep breath of the fresh midnight air.

"I know what's best for you, Bella. Always will." He patted one of her gloved hands. The patronising gesture infuriated her.

"Now why did you have to spoil it all by being your usual conceited self!" Unthinkingly, she slapped his thigh.

"I am what I am, Bella." He lifted his shoulders indolently. "Neither of us will ever change, I think."

"I've changed," she said, looking at the shaft of light thrown by the carriage lantern. She spotted a pair of eyes staring from beneath a bush, but they were soon swallowed up in the darkness.

"Oh yes, your hair has grown and you look exceptionally fetching in your fine clothes, but you'll always have a sharp tongue and a grudge where the English are concerned."

"Maybe so." She flicked at a loose tendril of hair that tickled her cheek. "But I've changed where you're concerned. I haven't called you a pig in a long time."

"True." He shot her a wide smile then clicked his tongue at the horse.

"Look at those stars," she exclaimed, craning her neck. "That's something I find so different out here; the skies are so clear, the nights so sparkling."

"Perhaps it's just that you didn't notice such things in London. Surrounded by grime and filth, struggling to fill your belly, you tend not to look to the skies."

"That's a fact. You spend so much time on the lookout for something to nab that often you forget that the flowers still blossom in spring, and the lambs are still born no matter what. All I wish is that my Ma and brothers and sisters could be here with me to see all this." With

an expansive gesture she took in the shadowed pastures, stretching endlessly across this vast dry land.

Tiger slowed the horse and turned the rig in at the main gate. Isabella sighed. She didn't want this night to end.

"Such a big sigh." Tiger peered across at her and she shrugged.

Should she tell him how she felt? No doubt he would gloat. Still and all, if he hadn't been so persistent she would never have known the thrill of dancing. More than a few of the women there had spurned her, it was true. But she had the satisfaction of knowing that most of them were eaten up with jealousy because, apart from that one dance with the Miss Bacon, Tiger had barely left her side all evening. Doubtless it was an act, but she'd never felt so wanted in her life.

The house lay quiet as Tiger pulled the horse up by the gate. He hopped down then walked round to lift his arms for Isabella. As he lowered her to the ground time seemed suspended, as for a long time he held her around the waist, then let her slip slowly to the ground. Isabella gasped as his hands gripped her. His nearness, his warmth, sent her heart pounding against her ribs.

"Thank you for your gracious company, Bella," he said, his voice low, his breath a sweet caress on her hot cheek.

"Don't tease me, Tiger," she whispered.

"Now why would my thanking you be considered a tease?" he asked, clearly surprised.

"Because you're always telling me what a nuisance I am, and what a shrew. I don't know what your reason was for taking me with you to the ball, but I'm sure it wasn't for my gracious company."

"Bella, my sweet girl." He laughed softly, and the beauty of his face took her breath away. "You're a lovely woman. Why would I need an ulterior motive for taking you to the ball?"

"Don't tell me lies, please. I'm not lovely and we both know it." With both palms on his chest she pushed away, but he tightened his hold on her.

"Bella, you have this very annoying habit of accusing me of lying to you. For once and all kindly take my words at their value."

She began to tremble when he pulled her forward until she could feel every inch of him against her from his knees to his chest.

"Didn't you notice how the men were looking at you with admiration in their eyes tonight? Why do you think I didn't let you out of my sight for too long? Because I was worried that if I turned my back someone

would whisk you away."

Isabella bent her head, her forehead resting on his shirtfront. Should she remind him that he had more or less assured his friends that he was about to set his cap at Prudence Bacon?

But then she forgot all else as he nuzzled the flesh of her shoulder with his mouth.

"I find you a very desirable woman," he murmured, feathering kisses along the slope of her shoulder and up her throat.

Isabella stifled the tart answer that trembled on her lips. Why not throw caution to the winds and enjoy these few moments out of time? Tomorrow he would be back to ignoring her, back to being her overlord and master. Tomorrow she would be back to being the kitchen maid, spending her days wishing for things that could never be. In reckless abandon she lifted her face as the unfamiliar longing swept her along, tempting her to taste forbidden fruits.

Tiger touched his mouth to the soft place below her ear, to the warm base of her throat where a pulse pounded wildly. She shivered, moaning deep in her throat as his lips moved tenderly against the lobe of her ear.

Tiger swallowed a groan. How he desired her. Sweet heaven! Perhaps he'd wanted her since the first moment he'd seen her with her face scrubbed clean and her hair damp and smoothed back from her delicate face. Although her beauty might not be of the classical sort that made artists swoon there was something about her that drew him like a moth to a flame.

She was pressing her body to his, unknowingly offering what he knew was not his for the taking. Why had he broken with Selena? If he needed a woman why didn't he go to her? But perhaps his fate had been decided when he'd finished with his mistress; perhaps this had been ordained. Why had he picked this woman out of the bunch on the wharf that fateful day? Nothing could have warned him that he would have such a lust for her.

Unable to help himself he pulled her hard against his body. A groan wrenched from him at the feel of her softness. It had been a long time since he'd had such an urgent desire for any woman, a desire that would never be sated. He pressed his mouth on hers, ignoring her small whimper of surprise, or was it acquiescence, kissing her with a demanding force. He knew he should be gentle with her, but desire roiled inside him, seething and hot. Her lips had the sweetness of spring and the heat of a summer's afternoon. To know she returned his desire

was like an aphrodisiac, goading him on.

"No," she protested on a small cry as he lifted his head a fraction to gaze down at her.

By the carriage light he saw that her mouth was swollen from his kisses; he sighed as he touched it, stepping back a pace and loosening his hold on her.

"Perhaps you're right," he said. "Go to bed, Bella. Go, while you can. I'll settle the horse."

Abruptly he turned away, combing his fingers through his hair. They were shaking so much he clenched them tight as he waited for her to go.

Isabella ran up the path. Inside the house she pressed her back against the door and took a few heaving breaths, her hot cheeks cupped in her shaking palms. Someone had left a candle alight, and by its flickering glow she sat on a highbacked chair, breathing a tired sigh. Her foot was throbbing. It hadn't ached all evening; or she hadn't been aware of it. Slipping her feet out of the soft dancing slippers, she crossed her bad foot over her knee and began to rub it, closing her eyes as she massaged the tired toes.

"Let me," Tiger offered, and her eyes shot open in dismay.

"I didn't hear you come in. I was just going to bed." She made to rise, but Tiger's hand, firm but gentle on her shoulder, pushed her back down.

Going down on his haunches he lifted her foot with infinite tenderness. As he began to rub, working up from the arch to the top of her deformed toe a glow seeped into her, warmth flowing from where his fingers touched her going right up to her belly, then onwards until it filled every part of her.

"Please don't," she whispered, but he shook his golden head, glancing at her with eyes that held a strange intensity.

"Why not? Doesn't that feel better? Don't you like it?" he asked. His tone was one she'd never heard before, deep and somehow strained.

Like it! She was burning inside; melting with a kind of warmth that seeped into her bones at the delicious sensations his touch evoked. His movements, which had begun as impersonal, changed, growing seductive as his fingers worked over the top of her foot, then lingered on her ankle. Those hands, which she'd seen put to heavy tasks about the farm, were now touching her with a kind of soft reverence that made her skin quiver with sensuous pleasure.

His hair fell forward as he bent to his task and Isabella fought the

urge to push the strand back. Then, of their own accord, her fingers lost the battle and she reached out. He looked up, as with trembling fingers she touched it.

He dragged in a sharp breath, then gave her a slow smile that sent her stomach tumbling.

"Yes, you like it."

Momentarily she felt a stab of annoyance at his supreme arrogance, then as he moved, stroking his fingers further up her ankle, over her calf, lingering on her knee, she forgot everything but the touch of his fingers, and the warm brush of his breath on her skin.

A moth was fluttering round the lamp, and in the quiet all she could hear was its wings flapping, Tiger's breathing, and her heart pounding, drumming through her head. Her lips parted on a small sigh and his eyes rested on them as if he had fallen under a trance.

Tiger knew he should stop, but his hands were moving with a will of their own over her skin. Her body was drawing him on like some nymph, luring him to taste her irresistible charms. Her eyes mesmerised him like refreshing pools on a scorching day, drawing him in as a siren calls to a sailor too long at sea.

"You've had too much to drink. You wouldn't be doing this otherwise," she whispered as he ran his fingers along her silken thigh above her stocking top.

The touch sent a jolt through her, making her tremble. It fired his passion, ignited a flame of desire within him.

"Perhaps we both have. Perhaps we both feel the magic, Bella. This night has been like no other. Why don't we forget who we are, forget everything and just taste the pleasures we both know we crave." Slowly he bent his head. Pushing aside her undergarments he placed a soft kiss on the inviting bare skin his fingers had just caressed.

She gasped. "No!" The denial burst from her lips. She was shaking her head, but as his fingers moved higher she made no move to stop him. He saw her bite her lip, and knew she was stifling a moan of protest, saw her hands clench into fists as she fought the urge to push him away. She was as lost as he was; as wrought by a passion she didn't understand.

But he understood it fully. Moving onto his knees he pressed forward between her spread legs then buried his face into the softness of her breasts. She arched back when his hands inched up her thighs and cupped her bottom.

"Please, Tiger," she whispered in a husky voice that echoed the longing engulfing him.

In one swift movement he was on his feet, drawing her up with him. Her body sank against his, yielding, soft, womanly. It was too much for him; she was too irresistible. He groaned his need as she wrapped her arms about him, pressed her softness against his hardness.

Isabella realised in the moment before his mouth touched hers that she wanted this kiss as much as he did. Probably more. Because he could get any woman at the lift of a finger, but this might be the only chance she would ever get to savour this delight, this heaven that was Tiger.

"Come with me." He drew her across the kitchen with a gentle tug on the hand.

Isabella had enough wit left to recognise that had she refused him he would accept it. But deep in her heart she knew that she might die with the pain of it if she said no to him.

He led her to her small room, not to his own. In a moment of instinctive panic she pushed at his hands as if to free herself.

"No, Bella love, don't fight me." He closed the bedroom door behind them.

"I don't – " she began, but he cut off her protest with his mouth and she was lost to everything but the touch, the taste, and the scent of him. All other thought fled. The smell of his skin, hot, earthy, manly, filled her, sent her senses spinning. The touch of his thighs against hers made her shiver. How many times had she dreamed of being thus with him? How many nights had she lain in her bed and longed for him to come to her, to take what she knew had always been his by right? And not because he was her master, her owner, but because he was the possessor of her soul.

In the soft moonglow streaking through the narrow window he looked driven by his need, intent. He had never looked more handsome. Her hand reached to touch his beloved face, her fingers tracing a path down his jaw then over his lips.

With the ease of a practiced lover he undid the hooks of her gown, the ties of her many petticoats, her camisole. With a gentleness that touched her deeply he picked her up then set her down on the narrow bed. Sitting beside her he kissed the rounded fullness of her breasts while he peeled her stockings off and tossed them to a corner along with her dancing slippers. His eyes never leaving hers he unpinned her hair

then pressed his lips to the strands as he ran it through his fingers.

"Let me do the same." She released his golden mane from the ribbon at his nape, smiling her pleasure as she copied him.

Her desire built until she knew no fear, no inhibition. Arching against him, she wordlessly pleaded with him to end this torment. When he left her she whimpered a protest.

"Hush, love," he murmured, hastily removing his own clothes until he stood before her, his body majestic in the half light.

Her eyes froze on the dark figure above her, so very powerful with its broad chest and muscular limbs, legs as firm as tree trunks. The evidence of his desire for her filled her with awe even as she shivered with sudden trepidation.

"You're beautiful," she whispered as he came back to her, stretching out at her side, letting her feel the hardness and strength of his magnificent body. Unexpectedly his skin felt like silk beneath her fingertips; silk over muscles as taut and firm as those of a thoroughbred horse.

He chuckled as his hands roved over her, from the curve of her shoulder, across the tip of her peaked breast to the rounded line of her hip. "Men aren't beautiful, love. But you are. Your skin is so soft; softer beneath my fingers than anything I've ever touched before. It's so pale, so smooth." He bent to circle her nipple with his hot tongue and Isabella bit down on a cry. One last vestige of apprehension made her stiffen, but then he muttered, "Don't fight me, Bella. This was meant to be, love."

His husky words enticed her. He was right. From the moment she'd laid eyes on him she'd known in some deep part of her heart that he would change her life.

"I don't wish to fight you, Tiger."

Her words seemed to break something inside him, and with a growl his great golden body covered hers. His mouth claimed her while his hands explored her, then both hands and body roused her to a wildness that was untamed, almost savage in its intensity as she spread her thighs and welcomed him between them.

"Dear God, Bella!" he bit out in the moment before he possessed her. Then his mouth covered hers, muffling her cry.

He began to move and sensations urged Isabella to join with him in the rhythm he set. When her world finally exploded in a burst of dazzling light she instinctively squeezed, encasing the man inside her. For one

moment in time, or was it an eternity, they were as one.

He let out a soft groan, his grip on her tightening as she lifted her hips from the bed. Her name burst from his lips in a voice she barely recognised. In the moment when his seed burst from him and he pulsed inside her, Isabella knew without a doubt that she was helplessly in love with this man; he would hold her heart in his hand until the day she died.

Tiger watched Isabella as she slept.

Ye Gods, what had he done? In the warm drowsy aftermath of their coupling she'd murmured words of love.

The heavy scent of passion hung in the sultry air, a reminder of his foolishness.

His fingers shook as he ran them through his hair. He groaned. Hell! What was he to do now? It had been a long time since he'd let his senses rule his head. Personally he wouldn't regret what had happened between them this night, but he knew what it would mean to Isabella. She would lump him in with the Englishmen she so despised, the one who had taken advantage of her mother, and the other who had raped her and left an unwanted child in her womb.

Taking great care to not waken her, Tiger eased away from the arm pressed so endearingly on his chest. A pang of something like shame shot through him as she let out a soft sigh and murmured his name.

With his feet on the floor he stared down at her, then rubbed his face with his hands, muttering a curse. At himself, not her.

Rum had a lot to answer for. If he hadn't drunk so much he wouldn't have succumbed to her irresistible charms. That's right, Timothy, blame drink. You're a mature man who prides himself on his honesty. Admit that you've wanted her from the first. He had no excuses to offer. But Lord, he dreaded facing her in the morning, probably more than he'd dreaded a lashing when he'd first been transported.

What to do? Let the morrow decide. Let her take the lead. Perhaps she'll not remember, or perhaps she'll think it a dream. Yes, and pigs might take to the air along with the birds.

Tiger rubbed his nape, then paced back and forth before pulling his breeches on. The temptation to touch her silken flesh once more proved too much for him and he leant over her, tracing a path over her shoulder,

down her arm. She made a small sound of pleasure and whispered his name again, her soft lips curving in a smile.

A stab of self-loathing tore through him. She didn't deserve to be treated like a whore. But there could be no future for them. His future was planned. Mistress Prudence Bacon might not set him on fire, might be as plain and ordinary as a bag of beans, but she possessed what he coveted most: the entrance to a world so far denied him. True, he was wealthy, and the Governor allowed men such as he to own land and property, but still he was on the outer edge of society. A society he craved to be a part of. Even if only to thumb his nose at them.

Isabella was the type of woman who would expect love and devotion from the man she wed; a marriage of convenience would not suit her. Dougal was the one for her. The man worshipped her, could make her happy.

With that thought in mind Tiger glanced down once more at the enticing woman on the bed amid the tousled sheets, picked up his boots and the rest of his clothing, and crept out, feeling a bit like a thief in the night. Which, when all was said and done, he was.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Isabella stretched her arms above her head and pointed her toes to the end of the bed. Still in a delicious dreamy state she smiled, feeling warm and delightfully soft. Her hands came down and ran over her ribs, then her belly. With a small start of surprise her eyes shot open when she realised she was naked.

She could feel a blush creeping up from her toes right to her scalp as she recalled the wanton way she'd behaved in Tiger's arms. Reaching out she slid her palm over the empty place by her side. It didn't shock her that he'd gone. It was just like Tiger to worry about her reputation. He wouldn't want Thelma, Ginger, or especially Dougal to know what had happened last night. Pressing her face into the pillow she breathed in, smiling like a kitten that'd just lapped up a saucer of cream. Tiger's scent still clung to the linen.

She couldn't wait to see him; to find out if he was as happy as she was. Of course they would get married soon. He hadn't mentioned it, but Isabella knew he would ask her now. If he hadn't wanted to wed her he wouldn't have taken her to bed, now would he? That talk at the ball about taking a nob's daughter for a wife was just nonsense made up to tease his friends. Tiger wasn't the type of man who would marry for position.

Sliding her feet to the floor she let her hands stray to her breasts. They felt swollen and achy, her whole body aware as it had never been before that she was a woman. Looking down at herself she lifted her shoulders and smoothed a hand over her stomach then around her thighs.

Sighing, she lifted her hands to push back the hair he'd tangled his fingers in. Oh, but it was surely a grand feeling to be female and fulfilled. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined it would be so between a man and a woman. The horrific experience she'd had with the man who raped her had soured her thinking, but Tiger's lovemaking had been glorious. That was how it should be between lovers.

To think he was now hers. They would have a lifetime of such shared times. She held the soft fabric of her ball gown to her cheek and pirouetted in the confined space. She could dance. She could really dance. Just wait 'til her Ma heard.

Isabella wanted to sit down then and there to write a letter telling her

Ma all about the ball and the excitement of meeting the Governor, and most of all how Tiger had encouraged her to forget about her misshapen foot. How he'd made her feel she was just the same as the gentry.

But she'd have to curb her impatience until Tiger confirmed a date for their wedding. Then she'd write, filling her letter with all her exciting news. Her Ma wouldn't believe that her little Bella had found such happiness in the colony. Isabella couldn't hold back a laugh of absolute joy as she hugged herself.

Quickly she bathed and dressed, impatient to see her lover. Humming one of the melodies she'd danced to she went out to the kitchen. It was empty.

"Thelma," she called. There was no answer.

Going outside she saw Thelma reaching to pick some gooseberries that grew along the garden fence. "Thelma, why didn't you leave that for me," she scolded, limping over to Thelma's side.

"You were sleeping so peacefully I didn't like to disturb you. Tiger said I was to let you lie abed as long as you wished this morning." Thelma gave her an oddly quizzical look.

"He did?" Isabella smiled. How thoughtful of him. "Where is he? I would have thought after our late night that he would have been wanting to spend a little extra time abed too." Isabella felt the hot colour rising up her cheeks and turned swiftly away from Thelma's gaze. Did she look any different? Perhaps Thelma could read it in her eyes, see it in the movements of her changed body.

"He was up with the dawn." Thelma waved a hand in the general direction of the fields. "Off with Ginger and Dougal to the far paddock. He said he mayn't be back this night. Something about having an urgent message to deliver for the Governor. Then he was returning the horse and rig he hired."

"Oh." Why hadn't he told her? But of course they had been too engrossed in each other for him to think of such mundane things. But why hadn't he awakened her to say goodbye?

"And how did you enjoy your first ball then, my girl?" Thelma asked, and Isabella forgot her misgivings as she regaled Thelma with every detail of the magical evening.

"I didn't hear you come in. Must have been mighty late," Thelma commented, and Isabella couldn't make out the strange look on her face. It was almost as if she was waiting for Isabella to divulge something.

"Aye. I never wanted the evening to come to an end, Thelma." She

sighed. "It was the most exciting night of my life. If I live to be a hundred I will never have one to better it."

Thelma handed her the bowl of fruit then put an arm about her shoulders as they walked back to the house. "That's grand, girl. Every woman should have one day or night out of a lifetime that is so special it stays lodged in a place in her heart, so's she can bring it out on bad days and dream about it to make everything seem better."

"I don't think I'll ever have another bad day as long as I live Thelma. Life is going to be so good from now on, you wait and see." Isabella lifted her face to the sun, unable to stop her mouth from curving into a smile.

Thelma didn't say any more as they went inside, but her eyes wore such a look of sadness that momentarily Isabella wondered if she sensed some tragedy about to befall them. She shrugged the odd feeling off. Today was not the time to dwell on life's misfortunes.

Isabella swept through her mundane chores in a trance. She couldn't wait for the day to end, for the next day to pass. Why oh why did Tiger chose to go off overnight? She would have to give him a strong talking to when he showed up. That was comical. Doubtless she would be meek and submissive from now on, if that was how he expected a good wife to behave. Whatever he wanted of her she would be willing to give.

Isabella's heart began to beat like a drum as soon as she heard the thundering of Satan's hooves on the hard ground.

Thelma dried her hands on her apron, and went to peer through the window. "Well, Bella, the master's returned," she said mildly. "He'll be starving for a taste of my food and a swig of ale. 'Tis hot as an oven out there with the brickfielder a'blowing."

Isabella swallowed hard. Her throat felt tight and dry. Today had been one of the longest in her life, the hours dragging by as she waited for Tiger to come home. Her impatience must have been clear to Thelma. She dropped the spoon she'd been drying. Wiping her hands she turned abruptly for the door, saying, "I'll go and see if he needs any help with his horse, seeing as Dougal isn't here."

She heard Thelma's grunt of disbelief as she raced out the door.

Tiger was throwing Satan's saddle over the side of his stall as she entered the stable. His shirt was grubby, clinging to his back and damp

with sweat beneath his armpits. His boots were covered with dust. As he turned she saw that his face was also streaked with dirt.

"Hello," she whispered, the word of welcome coming out on a husky note.

"Bella." He sounded surprised to see her there. "What are you doing out here? Doesn't Thelma need you inside?"

His eyes watched a space somewhere over her head and a panicky wave of fear shimmered through her.

"I missed you. I wanted to be here for you when you came home. Why didn't you tell me you weren't coming back last night?" She smiled sweetly, letting him know her soft rebuke was meant in fun.

"I don't have to tell you a thing," he said.

Isabella gasped, and a brief look of something like shame passed over his face.

"I know that, Tiger." Isabella moved closer, watching as he picked up a brush and began to smooth it over Satan's flanks. "Tiger, what is it? Have I done something wrong? The night of the ball..."

"You've done nothing wrong, Bella." He straightened, and for the first time looked her in the eye. "We need to talk about what happened. Between us. After the ball." His words came out jerkily, as if he was having trouble finding them.

"Talk?" She felt foolish.

"Yes, Bella. I had no right to touch you. Had no right to take you to bed. I think it best if we try and forget it ever happened."

"Forget it? How can I forget something that has altered my whole life?"

"Bella." At last he came close enough to touch her. Claspng her upper arms he stared down at her for so long without speaking that she began to feel as if she was standing on the very edge of a high cliff and about to fall forward into space.

Where had her passionate lover gone? A man who seemed like a stranger had replaced him. Was it supposed to be like this? Did all lovers feel so strange when confronting each other after the first time they'd lain together? Confusion filled her. Insecurity attacked her, making her more frightened than she'd felt on the ship when dreading what the future held.

"What I'm trying to say, Bella, is that I should never have made love to you. Call it the magic of the night, the impulse of the moment. It won't happen again." He shrugged and she stared at his shoulders as they

lifted then settled. The sweat-soaked shirt clung to his chest where the gold hairs peeped out of the opening. A picture of that chest, naked and glistening as he'd reared above her, wavered before her eyes.

Anger, like a great tide, seeped up from the depths of her soul. She hit out at him, catching him by surprise. He stumbled back, then righted himself as he fell against Satan's side, one hand on the stallion's wither. The horse let out a soft snort.

"So, I'm not to be your wife," she spat, her fist still raised.

The look of chagrin that crossed his face would have been laughable if the whole thing hadn't been so sickening.

"Wife? Bella, you know my intentions on that subject."

The statement was issued in a flat, quiet way that maddened her even more. How dare he stand there and issue his caution as if he was discussing the weather and not something that would affect the rest of her life.

"Of course. How daft of me!" She tapped her forehead a couple of times with a finger. "And I wouldn't be good enough to be the wife of the great Tiger Carstairs. No, he's got the pick of all the nobs. He's got hisself a wealthy virgin all picked out! Why would he choose his lowly scullery maid, a convict who attacked one of the nobs he reveres so much?"

She felt like screaming, stamping her feet, and tearing her hair out by the roots. Pain sliced through her so that she wondered briefly how she wasn't dying of it. Like knives twisting in her innards the pain cut through her heart. She fought to hold back the tears. This man would never see her shed a single one.

"Bella." He stepped towards her, but pulled up short when she glared at him, her hands clenched at her sides. "There's nothing lacking in you. You're a very desirable and beautiful woman. It's just that I have these dreams that eat away at me. An' the only way as far as I can see to attain my goals is to wed a woman who will open doors for me. Surely you can see that we'd be no good together, you and I . . ."

"Yes, I see." Her head went up and down a few times. "I would just hold you back. Isabella O'Shea, a simple Irish convict, is good enough for a tumble, but isn't good enough to share your life, your dreams." She pressed her fingertips to her mouth, scared the pain would force its way out in a cry of agony.

"Don't belittle what we shared, Bella. It was remarkable. You're a very passionate woman." Tiger held up a hand as if to touch her, but

she looked at it as if it were a snake and he dropped it to his side.

"An' you took advantage of me! You raped me!" she yelled, thumping at his chest as tears she could no longer hold back cascaded down her cheeks.

Tiger grabbed her flailing hands. "Rape? Oh no, don't ever accuse me of that! You were with me all the way. You wanted me as much as I wanted you. I would never have made love to you if you weren't willing. I can be accused of many things, but violating unwilling females has never been a crime anyone could blame on me."

"You seduced me. How can you stand there and say I allowed you to take me? You're a man who's known many women. You're what I always thought you were, Tiger Carstairs, a rutting English beast! You used your strength and your power to get what you wanted without a thought for my feelings.

"I'll hate you for the rest of my days. D'you hear me, I'll die hating you." Lashing out with her hands and feet she thrashed him about the body, shins, head, neck; anywhere she could reach. "Jesus, I wish I had a knife in me hand right now, I'd kill you, yes I would!" she screamed, tears running into her mouth.

"Hate me all you will," he grunted, fielding her blows. "But thank me you will, Bella. When you come to your senses you'll see that it's only sensible that we don't repeat what we did."

Managing to grasp her wrists he pulled her into his arms, where she stilled, sobs racking through her. Isabella struggled again, and he tightened his hold. She heard him groan as she battled him. Then she felt his burgeoning arousal and increased her struggles, finally managing to free herself, stepping back so swiftly she nearly fell.

"You swine!" she yelled. "Don't you touch me. If I ain't fit to wed you then I ain't fit to be treated no better than a whore!" In her anger she'd lapsed into the cockney speech she'd picked up on the ship.

Her cheeks flamed and her hair streamed wildly about her head. Tiger's eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared before he turned his back on her and went back to tend his horse.

"I never treated you like a whore, Bella. And have no fear, I'll not touch you again."

When Tiger turned around he was alone in the stable with Satan. The horse whickered, nuzzling his ear. Tiger picked up the mobcap Isabella had dropped in her frenzy of anger. Crushing it in a palm he slumped onto a bag of grain, his head bent.

Ye gods! What had he done? In all honesty he had to admit that he deserved her contempt.

"What in God's name have you done to that girl?"

Thelma gave Tiger a sour look as she placed a plate of food on the table before him. "I'm blessed if she wasn't the happiest lass in this colony when she got up this morning and her chirpiness was fit to drive me mad all day. It all changed as soon as you turned up."

"Leave it, Thelma," Tiger snapped, his mouth set as he picked up his knife and fork. "'Tis strictly between Bella and myself."

"Oh, Tiger!" Thelma glared at him. "I pray you haven't done something that's going to spoil the girl's life. She was in such doldrums when she arrived here, and I've watched her blossom."

Tiger scowled a warning, but she persisted, "She enjoyed the ball so much, she was like a little girl with her first present, and it was all thanks to you. And something tells me that this unhappiness is all down to you too."

"Forget it, Thelma," Tiger warned.

He felt bad enough without Thelma rubbing salt into the wounds. He'd hurt the chit, now she would doubtless hate him. God! He deserved to rot in purgatory. He was no better than Malloy. Worse, for the Irishman was a simple lecher whereas he'd used seduction to slake his lust. He deserved her scorn; what he hadn't expected was the pain that gnawed at his innards.

Tiger saw Thelma's eyes narrow thoughtfully and he knew she suspected what he'd done.

"No, Tiger!" She put her palms on the table and made a sound of disgust in her throat. "I would never have believed it of you. How could you do that to the girl? After all she's been through. I don't believe it!"

"Like I said, Thelma, keep out of it! 'Tis not your business."

"No, you're right." Thelma drew in a ragged breath as she folded her arms and rocked back on her heels. "But I'm the one who will have to pick up the pieces of her broken heart."

"She won't have a broken heart, Thelma. She's too tough. Believe me, she's already back to calling me names. She's a survivor, she'll get by."

"She's no tougher than . . . why, than that wee bird out there." She

fluttered a hand toward the garden where a lone bird was filling the air with its sweet song. "An' just when she was beginning to find some happiness in life."

Tiger felt like slamming his fist into something. "Hell! What do you expect me to do? Marry the wench?"

"An' what's so bad about that idea? What is she? Too far beneath you, Tiger? Have you got so far above yourself that you see the girl as only fit to warm your bed and not fit to share your life?" Stomping over to the dresser she began clattering dishes.

"That's more or less what she said." Tiger pushed his plate away, the food forgotten. "Where is she now?" He looked about, rubbing his nape wearily.

"Off licking her wounds, I don't doubt."

Tiger put his head in his hands and groaned.

She turned to glare at him, her chest heaving. "Men!" she muttered. "Christ, us women have to place our lives in your hands an' there's not one of you that has the brains to know how our minds work."

The chair toppled as Tiger scraped it back.

"Enough!" he roared.

Furious with her and himself he strode from the room.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Isabella put her ear to the door. She heard Thelma and Ginger bid the other two goodnight, then Dougal and Tiger speaking softly.

Poor Dougal had been so confused these past few days, knowing something was dreadfully wrong but unable to get up the courage to broach the subject. She knew he'd sensed her despair, but had been unable to fathom out the animosity between her and Tiger. Or perhaps he had known yet preferred to keep his own counsel.

At last she heard Dougal going out, then the floorboards creaked as Tiger paced backwards and forwards. He stopped by her door, and she could hear his breathing as he stood there for immeasurable minutes. Then he tapped lightly on the wood and called her name.

Isabella held her breath. There was no lock on the door. He could just push it open and enter. What did he think she was? Did he really expect to come crawling to her bed and she would just let him in? But he did nothing more than call her name again, and when she didn't answer he went away.

She relaxed, returning the candlestick she'd been gripping to the bedside chest. Frightened that if she lay down she would doze off she sat for at least a half hour, listening to Tiger moving about next door. Eventually there was silence in the house.

Not bearing to dwell on what she was doing in case she weakened, she picked up the small bundle of belongings she'd shoved beneath the bed. She checked that the long-bladed knife she'd stolen was fixed securely down her belt. With one long look about the room that had been such a joy to her until the night he'd shattered all her hopes, she opened the door carefully and peeped out.

The house sighed and groaned as it settled down for the night. A mouse scampered across the rug, heading for a gap at the side of the fireplace. Tiptoeing across the kitchen, Isabella propped the letter up by the lamp in the middle of the table. Her only regret was leaving Thelma and Dougal without telling them where she was going. But she wasn't sure of her destination, and she didn't want them coming after her.

Before she could change her mind she went out and closed the front door, setting off down the path resolutely. It was a cloudy night with the promise of a storm in the air. Her bundle wasn't heavy, for she'd not brought much with her. What did she need with the things Tiger

Carstairs had given her? Her new owner would supply her with the essentials. Striding out along the road to town she experienced a moment's regret for what she'd left behind. In a wild fit of rage and frustration she'd taken a knife to the gown she'd worn to the ball, ripping it to shreds.

Her anger gave her strength, and for the first few miles she kept up a steady pace, but as she neared the town her spirits began to droop along with her energy.

She would make for Gracie's place of employment. The government official she worked for would put her in touch with the right authority. If she ended up at Parramatta in the female factory, so what? Tiger had turned her into a whore, so if she had to satisfy the lusts of the officers in that brothel at least she could begin to earn a few pennies of her own.

At that thought she sank down by a tree, curling her legs beneath her. How had her life, which had looked so promising, turned into this desolate mire? She would have done just as well to have gone with Malloy that first day. He had wanted her for one purpose alone, but Tiger had turned out to be no different. The only difference was that she'd foolishly given him her heart. What a fool! Life didn't hand out happy endings to people like her.

Scrambling to her feet she began to walk on. She had only once been to the home where Gracie worked. Uncertain of the exact whereabouts she stood in the shadow of a double storey building while she took her bearings. Looking up she saw she was on the corner of Pitt Street and King Street. It wasn't far from there, she knew.

Gnawing her lip she listened to the noises coming from the wharf area. She would be able to get a job down there easily enough. But did she have the audacity to just walk into a tavern and ask for work? No. The thought of entering one of those vile dens sickened her. Ever since Malloy had kidnapped her she had lived in fear of entering The Rocks. Remembering that night brought on memories of Tiger, and how he'd rescued her. Was she a fool for running away? Could she have borne a life as his whore?

Shaking her head she emerged from her hiding place and stealthily limped on. She went rigid with fright when a hand suddenly clamped over her mouth and the strong aroma of rum, tobacco and sweat surrounded her. Her captor's other hand gripped her about the waist, so tightly that it nearly cut off her breath.

"Well, well, what's a nice little tart like you doing poking about in my

territory, eh?" the man grated, laughing evilly when she tried to struggle free. "It's not often I get such a juicy bit of female flesh practically falling in me lap." The man guffawed, squeezing one of her breasts until she cried out at the pain. "Yes, very juicy." With a small sound of surprise he discovered her weapon and laughed again as he withdrew it and waved it in front of her face. "Well, well, a slut with a blade, eh?"

Isabella groaned. No, not another such as Malloy! The strong smell of rum made her want to vomit as he brought his face round until it was level with hers. Now she'd lost the chance to defend herself.

"Scum!" she screamed, and with all her might jabbed her elbow into his middle. His soft grunt was reassuring. If she didn't get away now, he'd use her knife on her. She kicked him in the shins, then brought her foot up and stamped down as hard as she could on his ankle. He cried out in surprise, loosening his grip. Isabella ran.

At that moment a carriage came out of the darkness. Isabella heard the driver's warning call, heard the horses snort with fear, heard the wheels crunching, then a screech as the driver applied the brake. She hit the front leg of the nearest horse, and fell backwards. Her head hit the ground with a sharp crack and she dropped into blackness.

"What is it, Jenkins?" the man who clambered from the carriage demanded. "What the bloody hell's happened?"

"'Tis a woman, sir. She ran in front of us." The driver jumped down from the benchseat and bent over the sprawled body. "I think the horse struck her." Touching her arm, he breathed a heavy sigh when she moved and groaned. "At least she ain't dead, sir."

"Thank the Lord. Bring her up, and put her inside." Lieutenant Gareth Moreton also breathed a sigh. Good God! What if the girl had died? The resulting scandal didn't bear thinking about. Here in the colony life was pretty cheap, but nonetheless scandals among the upper echelon were still held up and dissected at every opportunity. A mild-mannered and honourable member of the Forty Eighth Northamptonshire Foot regiment, Moreton had no interest in bringing scandal down around his neck. He was betrothed, due to marry in a matter of months. An inquiry as to why he was racing through Sydney Town in a carriage at this time of night would have made life awkward, to say the least.

The woman groaned and opened her eyes. "How are you feeling?" Gareth queried softly, taking her hand and squeezing it.

"My head hurts." Isabella couldn't see the man leaning over her

because her eyes refused to focus, but his voice was kindly. He had the smell of a gentleman about him, and past experience had taught her that it didn't pay to trust them. Stifling her fear she tried to lift her head to glance furtively about. "That man jumped out on me. I tried to run away ..."

"Yes, yes, don't worry now. He's taken off. You're quite safe with me."

That was a matter of opinion, but for the moment there was little she could do about it. Her head ached and she felt dizziness engulf her.

"Jenkins, lift the young lady into the carriage," Moreton ordered the hovering driver, saying in that soft voice that encouraged her confidence, "Careful man, that's the ticket, gently does it."

"My bundle," Isabella said as she hunched into a corner of the carriage, a hand to the back of her head where it throbbed.

"What? Oh, yes, Jenkins, the lady's belongings. Fetch them."

He nodded at his driver, who came back with the package and placed it at her feet.

"Where to, sir?" he asked, winking at Isabella. She gave him a wan smile as he patted her in a fatherly fashion on her knee.

"Where is your home, madam? Where were you heading so late at night, alone?" Gareth scratched at his short crop of carrot hair. She didn't look like a harlot, so what was a respectable young woman doing out and about in this part of town?

"Home?" she asked vaguely, before she slumped back, obviously in a swoon.

"Saints preserve us! Jenkins, you're a sensible chap. What do you suggest we do with the lady? Take her to the infirmary?"

Jenkins shook his head. "I doubt they could do much with her, sir. She looks to have a bad bump on the head. A bit of a kip should have her on the mend, I'd say."

"Um, well. Perhaps you could take her home with you?" Moreton suggested. "Your lady wife would know what to do with her."

Jenkins stepped back as if he'd been shot.

"Oh no, sir!" Holding both hands in front of him like a shield, he cried, "My missus wouldn't hold with me bringing no stray woman home in the middle of the night. I'd like as not be thrown out on me ear. No, sir, you'll have to think of something else."

Gareth would have laughed if it weren't so serious. "I have an idea. It's the only one I can come up with at this late stage. Jenkins, return to

where you just picked me up. The good lady will not turn away another female in need, I'm sure."

Jenkins grinned and nodded. "Perfect sir," he agreed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Gareth, darling! What on earth are you doing back here?" Selena gasped her surprise when Jenkins pushed past him with the limp girl in his arms.

"Selena, I didn't know where else to take the unfortunate soul." Gareth raised his eyes and gave his mistress a grin he hoped would placate her. He felt sheepish now, but still he could think of no better place to take the wench.

"Unfortunate soul! What the hell do you mean?" There was a touch of hysteria in the question.

"This woman ran in front of the carriage," he explained. "She's unconscious, my dear. I had no idea what to do with her. You know what a scandal it would cause if I reported it to the authorities."

"What do you take me for? Why have you brought a dead body to my house?" There was definitely hysteria threading her voice now. "Take her away. I demand you remove her from my house!" Selena pointed one of her white fingers at the door.

But Jenkins had already put the woman down on the chaise and she was moaning as she regained consciousness.

"Where am I?" she mumbled.

"Well, I'll be damned." Selena sauntered over and stood staring down at the woman, her lips curled in a sneer. She put a finger to her chin and tapped it thoughtfully. "How strange fate is, Gareth darling!" This was the convict woman she'd seen with the others of Tiger's household outside the church one Sunday. Numerous people had told her with spiteful relish that she had accompanied him to the ball. "If it isn't Tiger Carstairs' whore!"

Gareth went to join her. "It's the woman who attended the Governor's Christmas shindig, all right. But steady on, Selena darling. There's no proof that she's his harlot."

Selena smirked. "Gareth darling, sometimes you're so gullible. Tiger isn't the sort of man to live without a woman in his bed for long. What other reason would he have for taking such a plain little thing to the ball? No, he's grown mean as well as arrogant, too stingy to pay for what he can get free." Her emerald eyes gleamed with satisfaction. "You say she ran into your horse, eh?"

Gareth disagreed about the wench's looks. He found her pleasing to

the eye. But then women saw things differently. He nodded, and Selena's laugh was a merry tinkle. He frowned, seeing nothing amusing in this at all.

"So she was running away from the high and mighty Tiger, was she? That's the only explanation for her being out alone this far from his property. What a splendid joke. Did she say where she was heading, darling?"

"No, she swooned before I got any sense out of her. Can she stay, Selena?"

Selena patted him on the hand and gave him a serene smile. Gareth was a dear, but he would never take the place of Tiger. God, how she hated that golden giant. And how she missed his passion, his fire. Probably there was no man alive who would ever match up to him. This doxie had played right into her hands.

"Of course she can stay." She ran a finger up his arm and gave him one of her most provocative smiles. "How could I turn another woman away. She's obviously in need of a place to stay, or why else would she be wandering the streets at night."

"Thank you, Selena." Gareth breathed a sigh of relief. "I'll be by tomorrow. Is that all right?" He gave her a diffident smile.

Selena returned his smile, her eyes narrowing. Poor Gareth, he was still unsure of where he stood with her. "Yes, darling, that will be fine." As he made for the door, after placing a swift kiss on her cheek, she called after him, halting him with his fingers on the latch. "And Gareth, don't say a word about her to anyone. The poor girl obviously doesn't want her whereabouts known, so it would be best if Tiger doesn't know she's here, don't you think?"

"Excellent idea," he agreed, smiling gratefully.

"Oh, and make sure the driver keeps his mouth shut too."

"I will. Goodnight." He gave her another thankful look as he waved before climbing into the carriage.

"Goodnight, Gareth darling." Selena watched until the vehicle had rumbled off into the night, then went back to stand over her rival. Smug satisfaction made her want to jig like a girl, something she hadn't done in an age.

"Wh . . . Where am I?" Isabella licked her dry lips and pushed herself

onto her elbows. Shaking her head slightly she tried to focus on something. Then she remembered. The ruffian had grabbed her. Then the carriage . . .

"Oh my!" Putting a hand to the back of her head she winced. There was a swelling there as big as a fowl's egg.

"At least you didn't cut your scalp," a soft and vaguely familiar voice said from behind the couch where she lay. Isabella sat up, then held her head in her hands as the room began to spin.

"Steady now, you had a nasty bump on the head. Take it easy," the voice drawled.

Isabella did as ordered, then turned slowly to face the woman. How strange! Surely this was Selena Drake. Peering more closely at the beautiful woman above her, she saw that she was right. She looked about. Was this the house of the woman who had been Tiger's mistress? And if it was, what was she doing here?

"What am I doing here?" She put her thought into words as she managed to finally put her feet to the floor.

Wrapped in a flimsy pink housegown that fell in soft folds over her voluptuous figure the woman drifted over to stand in front of Isabella. "Here, drink this, it will make you feel better." She offered a fine china teacup.

"Thank you ... I don't understand." Isabella sipped at the hot liquid, the saucer clutched between fingers that shook slightly.

"A good friend of mine, Lieutenant Gareth Moreton, happened to be a passenger in the carriage that you ran into, my dear. Fortunately for you he's a gentleman. As he was handy to my house he brought you here. I dread to think what fate may have befallen you if you had ended up in the hands of one of the rogues who plague the streets after dark. What in God's name were you doing out at this time of night on your own . . . Isabella, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. I was ... going to a friend. How did you know my name?"

"Oh my dear, you've been the talk of the town since you went to the ball on the renowned Tiger's arm." Sitting next to Isabella she arched her perfect brows. "A friend? After dark? In this town? Come now, only an idiot would risk their life like that. And something tells me you are no fool, Isabella."

"Call me Bella, everyone else does. No, you're right. I may as well tell you the truth. I couldn't stay in his house any more. I'd rather not say why. But I had to leave, and I had to do it when I couldn't be followed.

I'm still his servant, owned by him, an' he will follow me, I know. Even though I'm the last person he wants in his home." Isabella tried not to let her despair show.

"Why on earth would you think that?" Selena leant nearer, obviously puzzled.

"I don't want to talk about it, Selena." Isabella took a mouthful of the tea. "May I call you that?"

"Of course." Selena shrugged her exquisite shoulders. "I don't have very loving thoughts where Tiger Carstairs is concerned. If you say you have no wish to return to him, I can understand that, and let me say my sympathies are with you. The only problem now is the authorities." Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "They'll be after you once he's reported you've absconded. Gareth won't say that you're here. He's reliable. You can stay here with me until you decide what you want to do."

"Thank you, Selena. I'd be very grateful." Isabella nibbled at her bottom lip. "But I won't be able to repay you. I can't get paid work. I was going to apply for a transfer to a new owner. My friend Gracie is working for an official. I was hoping her master would put in a good word for me to get me a job in his kitchen. I'd sooner go to the female factory than go back to Tiger!"

Selena recoiled in shock. "You have no idea what you're talking about, Bella. The dregs live and work down there. You'd soon lose all self-respect and end up no better than the whores who populate it. No, my dear, a sensible woman uses her head as well as her body. Do you like my house?" She glanced about the room.

"It's lovely." Bella also looked about, taking in the polished dining table and four padded chairs, the dresser stocked with fine bone china, the tall clock in the corner, the chaise they were sitting on. It was a finely furnished room. Candles in ornate holders sent a soft glow over everything. Isabella had never seen a more fetching place in her life, apart from the Governor's residence. Quickly she stifled that thought; she would never think of that magical night again.

"I own all this. There aren't many women in the colony who can boast that. All right, so the wives and their daughters may snub me and look down their refined noses at me. But I don't have to take orders from any man. I do as I please, take lovers as I fancy. These pasty-faced matrons and the sallow misses who sneer at me are locked in cages of their own making. How would you like to be your own woman, Bella? Have your own home, your own space, be answerable to no man?"

"It certainly sounds as if you are getting the best of a bargain, Selena. But how can you?" Isabella cleared her throat. "I mean ... don't you have to ...?"

"Let's not be coy, Bella. I entertain men callers. Let's face it, most of the other women in the colony sleep with men. The difference is that I get paid handsomely for my favours. I have all this." She spread her arms to encompass the comfortable room.

"Other women are used by their men, suffer all sorts of indignities, and then own nothing. If they are dissatisfied with their lot in life they cannot walk away from it. They would be thrown out without a penny or a scrap of clothing to call their own. It's a sad fact that most men, once married, treat their wives no better than chattels, while they are off playing with the other men in their clubs, or with their mistresses. And the mistresses get paid handsomely while the wives have to lie back and think of other things." She chuckled. "'Tis the way of the world."

"But ..." Isabella didn't know quite how to put it.

"Come, you can speak plainly with me, Bella." Selena smiled encouragingly.

Isabella cleared her throat again, then asked. "Isn't it horrible having to lie with different men? Men you most likely despise?" She thought of the lecher who had raped her. Just imagining being compliant with the likes of him made her feel sick.

"Men like Tiger, you mean?" Selena studied her long tinted nails. "Let's face it, Bella, every woman over fifteen in the colony would lie with him given half a chance, no matter how they might deny it indignantly. Now I have Gareth, the sweetest lover a woman could hope for. No, Bella, I'm not a whore or a doxie who plies her wares at the wharf. I'm a woman with brains who sells what most women give for nothing. I'm a woman of quality." She shrugged eloquently. "Tell me honestly, wouldn't you rather be a rich man's mistress than a poor man's drudge?"

Isabella would sooner be a certain farmer's wife, but that possibility was out of her grasp. She had to agree with this beautiful woman who seemed to have her life well in hand.

"It's late, Bella. You can stay here until you make up your mind." Selena got up. Staring down at Isabella she said, "Think about it. I can teach you how to become the most sought-after paramour in the colony. Or you can end up with the dregs, the doxies, the women of the gutter. It's up to you Bella. Sleep on it. But let me tell you, there's not a lot of

choice in the colony for a woman like you. Why do you think they bring so many females over here for such petty crimes? I don't know what offence you committed, and don't really care. We were all brought here to service men in one capacity or another. Why not take the easy way out?

"Now I'll get you a quilt, and if you decide to stay, tomorrow my maid will make up a bed for you alongside hers." As she spoke Selena had been snuffing out the candles. Leaving one burning she went to a door at the back of the parlour. After handing Isabella a blanket she said, "Goodnight, Bella."

"Goodnight. And thank you for letting me stay, Selena."

Isabella was still wide awake when dawn crept in.

"What do you mean, she's gone?" Tiger stared at Thelma, his heart sinking. "She's gone out for a walk? Gone into town?" He didn't know why he was asking, for he sensed that Bella had not gone on some message, not gone off to be alone.

But gone for good!

The chit had sneaked off in the night, for God's sake! Why hadn't he foreseen it? A tightness in his chest made him shiver.

"She wasn't in her bed when I went into her room this morning, Tiger." Thelma twisted her apron between her thin fingers. Tiger had never seen her so agitated. Even when Ginger had been sick a couple of years back her face hadn't looked so haggard. Her eyes looked sunken.

He'd kill the wench for doing this to Thelma. If he ever saw her again. With a groan he contemplated that eventuality. Somehow Isabella had inched her way into a part of him that he'd always managed, until now, to keep inviolate.

"I thought she might be out in the orchard or off with her chickens." Thelma handed him a sheet of writing paper. "But I found this." She folded her arms across her chest and let out a shuddering sigh. "So I went into her room. She's taken her brush and comb and a change of clothes. Bless me but she never had much to take." She choked back a small cry. "And come with me, Tiger. See what I found."

Tiger stared at the sheet of paper in his hand as he followed her into the small back room. Something gave in him when he looked down on the narrow bed. Lord, would he ever get the taste, smell, and sight of her

sweet body, so yielding and passionate beneath his, out of his mind? Drawing in a ragged breath he turned to see that Thelma was holding a garment.

"Just look what she did, Tiger."

"Good God!" Thelma held the gown Bella had worn to the ball. The frock she'd loved so much had been hacked to ribbons. "What's the matter with her? What possessed her to do such a thing!"

"Unhappiness. The poor lass was dying of it." Thelma gazed at him for a moment, then said steadily, "I have to say this, Tiger, though you'll probably want to beat me for it, but you've hurt the girl so much she's been dying by the minute, pining for something she knew was out of her reach. You have a lot to answer for."

"That's enough, Thelma!" It was only the second time he had ever shouted at her. "What happened was between Bella and me. She knew the way of things."

"Knew the way of things did she?" Mutinously Thelma drew her lips together. "What will I do with this?" She gathered up the rags of the ball gown and, face taut with disgust, followed him from the room.

"I don't care. Burn the bloody thing and let's have an end to it!"

But in the kitchen he turned to her in appeal. "Where do you suppose she's gone? We can't leave her out there where the likes of Malloy can get their hands on her. I'll ride into town and report she's run away. Have you any ideas, Thelma?"

"There's her friend Gracie. Perhaps she made for the house where she works. The girl's not been far from the farm to make friends. We're all she has." Thelma flopped down on a chair, the ball gown lying forlornly on her lap. She ran her workworn hands over the shredded fabric.

"And we'll get her back. Have no fear, Thelma; I'll leave no stone unturned. I'll be away now." He put a hand to her shoulder and squeezed it gently. Thelma stiffened beneath his touch.

"Women!" he muttered as he strode out.

"Aye, women! What would you men do without them; yet silly sods that you are you have no idea how to handle them."

Tiger barely heard her. He was already on the way to saddle up Satan.

"I'll ring the wench's bloody neck," he ground out as he rode away. But inside he cringed as he pictured the fate that could quite easily be hers if she'd fallen into the wrong hands. Even now she could be dead

and tossed into the sea or the mire. A man only had to drive a small distance from town to dispose of an unwanted body. He rubbed a hand over his face and groaned. This was all due to his lust, and his greed. What sort of man was he? She'd put her trust in him, and he'd abused that trust.

He made straight for the wharf area. If she'd been picked up by one of the scum from there it would likely be spread thereabouts. Tiger ground his teeth. He'd whip the useless wench for putting him through this. No, he wouldn't. He'd likely pull her so tightly in his arms he'd wring every breath out of her body.

She had such a beautiful body, with all the curves and dips in just the right places. His dreams had been filled with her since that night he'd made her his. His! By God, she hated the very sight of him, and who could blame her!

Three hours later Tiger had come to the end of his tether. There was no word of her turning up in any of the haunts, no stories of murder being committed and hushed up. It was almost as if Isabella had disappeared off the face of the earth. Could she have ...?

No, it didn't bear thinking of. She was too stubborn, too tenacious, too proud and courageous to think of taking her own life. How conceited of him to entertain the thought. If all the humiliation of her rape and trial and subsequent transportation hadn't driven her to such an end, then surely his rejection of her wouldn't make her contemplate it.

A bitter taste filled his mouth and his head felt as if it was full of wool from the rum he'd swallowed in his course of questioning. But that was nothing to the ache of fear and frustration curdling his stomach.

A search would be mounted for her remains, if the worst had come about and she was dead, but naught could be done if she'd decided to melt into the flotsam that populated the town. God willing she would turn up at her friend Gracie's place of employment and all would be solved.

Something deep within him warned Tiger that this would not be resolved so satisfactorily. Why the bloody hell had he touched her? Damn and blast his idiocy!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Isabella dressed, then bent to pull on her shoes. There was a dull ache in her temples and the bump on the back of her head throbbed a little, but apart from that she felt quite well. Outside. Inside, she felt as if she would die at any minute from the pain. Why couldn't the horse have done a good job of it and trampled her into the ground, so ending all her unhappiness?

Folding the blanket, she bent to take her brush from her bundle. Coiling up her hair she glanced about. The room was more attractive by daylight with the sun streaming in to highlight the well-polished mahogany. There was no doubting Selena had a comfortable home. The gowns that Isabella had seen her in were beautiful and she knew from Thelma they were made by the seamstress who clothed the wives and daughters of the gentry.

"Why, bless me, what you doing 'ere?" a girl of about sixteen asked as she bustled into the parlour. She had a cheeky grin, and a face full of freckles. Mousy hair was tucked beneath a mobcap, and a huge apron with a flounced edge covered her plain frock. "I never 'eard you arrive. I sleeps like a dead 'un, do I." She winked, and Isabella couldn't hold back a smile.

"I was brought in last night by Lieutenant Moreton," Isabella explained.

"Brought in by Mr Gareth! Bless me, brought in from where?" she asked, eyes opened wide so that she looked like a baby owl. "'E ain't in the 'abit of bringing along young ladies. 'E's that shy is 'e that it's a wonder 'e manages to bring 'imself." She threw her head back and chuckled.

"His horse knocked me down." Isabella shrugged. "It seems this was the only place he could think to bring me." She thought his actions strange too. Why hadn't he taken her to the doctor's house or the hospital? But she should feel grateful that he hadn't simply left her to be picked up by some rogue like the one who had accosted her.

"Aye, it would be." The maid's head wagged knowingly. "So, how are you? Did you hurt your leg?" she asked when Isabella got up and walked to the window.

"My leg?" Isabella peered down at her foot. "Oh no, I already had a limp. I bumped my head." Putting a couple of fingers to the bump, she

wincing.

"Bumped yer 'ead, eh? I'm Katie, by the way, what's yer name? An' what were yer doing to get knocked down by an 'orse that time of night, then?"

"I'm Bella, Katie. Pleased to meet you." Isabella held out a hand and Katie shook it with gusto. Isabella wondered what to tell this girl. She decided to tell her the truth. What could she do anyway? The girl was Selena's servant.

"I ran away," she confessed.

Katie looked taken aback for a moment, then grinned. "Oh my, so where you gonna go now?"

"I have no idea. Selena says I have the looks to be a ..." She put her fingertips to her temple, pressing at the dull ache there. "The same as her," she finished.

"A lady of the night, eh?" Katie commented in a lowered voice. "She's right as far as the looks go. You be a beauty, an' that's a fact."

"Who, me? I'm as plain as a pikestaff."

"Course you ain't," Katie assured her. "You just need a bit of dressing up an' you'll 'ave all the swaggering young bloods chasing yer, an' that's a fact."

"Don't be daft. If I was as pretty as you say I am, then I'd be betrothed now to the man who ..."

"Man who bedded yer?" Katie asked gently. "Lord, but looks don't 'ave naught to do with that! You a con?" she asked, and Isabella nodded. "Well, if it was yer master, 'e'd take it as 'is due, now wouldn't 'e?"

Isabella grimaced faintly. His due! Ye gods, if Tiger Carstairs got his due, he'd be dead and buried now, the scurrilous devil!

"I only wish I 'ad the looks." Katie sighed as she shook her head. "Why give a man what 'e should pay for, eh? If Mistress Drake promised to teach yer the rules, then I'd take 'er up on the offer. What other choices do us cons 'ave, eh? I think meself lucky I didn't end up with no son of a bastard who treats 'is women no better than animals. I gets clean clothes on me back an' a belly full every day. What more could a girl ask, eh?"

"Love, perhaps? Don't you want a husband and children one day, Katie?"

"Love? Cripes, why should the likes of us expect such a fanciful thing? When I gets me ticket of leave I'm gonna try an' get a job in the

Guvner's 'ouse, working for 'is lady." She gave a great sigh. "Take me advice, Bella, let the madam help yer, an' you won't look back. Now, I have to get 'er breakfast. Come with me an' I'll show you where everything is. You can 'elp yerself."

Left alone in the small scullery off the parlour Isabella contemplated her options. Katie was right. Why give something you could be paid for. Nodding, she made up her mind. Perhaps she'd get a gentleman like Lieutenant Gareth Moreton, one of the nicest men she'd ever met. Then again she might get an arrogant gent like Tiger Carstairs. What a lark that would be if he turned up as one of her customers. He'd stew in his own juice if he had to pay her for what he considered his by right. The arrogant swine, may he rot in hell!

Yes, she would stay. And in time she'd become the highest paid courtesan in the colony, so sought after that when Tiger Carstairs begged for her favours she would send him packing. Just for a moment she allowed herself to recall the splendour of his lovemaking, then with a determination born of desperation she shrugged those thoughts aside and hardened her heart.

Tiger sprawled on a chair and rubbed his nape. "I don't know what else I can do, Thelma," he said wearily. "If you can think of something worthwhile, then tell me. She's apparently disappeared off the face of the earth. The Aborigines have been helping in the search. If her body is out there they would have found some trace of it by now." The thought of Bella's beautiful body lying crumpled and perhaps mutilated in some lonely spot had given him nightmares.

"We can only assume someone is sheltering her or she is being held prisoner." That thought, distasteful as it was, was infinitely more reassuring than the alternative. "But I'm sure if that was the case I would have heard a sniff of it by now." Tiredly he ran his hands over his face. There was a continual ache in his gut these days when he imagined the fate she could have met.

"You can't give up the search," Dougal insisted roughly.

Tiger raised his brows as he looked over to where the lad sat broodingly staring at his hands as they rested on the table in front of him.

At least Dougal was speaking to him now. After Isabella had been

gone a week they had come close to blows arguing over her welfare. Dougal had accused him of forcing her out. Tiger couldn't argue with that. Dougal had been doing a bit of searching on his own time, coming home some nights well after midnight, exhausted and defeated.

"You must face up to it, Dougal, she may be dead by now," Ginger said in a kindly voice.

"She's not!" Dougal thumped a fist down on the table. "I know she's out there somewhere. Like the time Malloy took her off. I swear to God I'll find her if he can't." He sent a sneer Tiger's way.

Tiger stood up, scraping the chair on the floor as he pushed it back roughly. "Come on, we'll go into town together this night. Mayhap we'll hear some new snippet. But it's been two months now." He spread his arms in a hopeless gesture. "And I for one have begun to dread ..."

"No!" Dougal jumped to his feet, glowering. "We'll find her."

But after the pair of them had visited most of the brothels, taverns, and bars on the waterfront, and questioned whalers, sealers, sailors, and other inhabitants of the town, it became clear that this night's search was going to be as fruitless as the others had been.

Tiger wasn't sure if Dougal had any clear idea of why Isabella had fled. It was cowardly of him, but he wasn't about to let him know the real reason. Dougal hated him; truth was he didn't blame him. He wasn't particularly fond of himself.

"Let's go home," he suggested, when the sun was peeping over the horizon, heralding the start of a new day. "There are animals to be tended."

Tight-lipped, Dougal nodded.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MARCH 1819

"Hey, yer look grand, Bella." Katie grinned as she inspected Isabella, who quaked in her new silk shoes. "Yer look like a princess from one of them fairy tales. Yer better looking by far than most of them fancy ladies who flaunt themselves around town." The chirpy maid giggled as she hoisted her chin and walked back and forth with a wiggle of her hips. "Now, just keep yer pretty chin in the air like the missus taught yer an' hold yer shoulders straight like this. Yer'd pass fer a lady in any company, an' that's no story I'm spinning yer."

"Thanks for the assurance, Katie." Isabella's voice shook, along with her body.

Taking a last quick look at herself in the long mirror she tugged on a curl that had been artfully brought from the cluster Katie had secured on the crown of her head, then straightened her spine.

"Oh Katie! I don't recognise myself," she wailed.

"Lor' sakes, neither should yer. The missus 'as been very careful to make yer into a different woman. An' this new woman is lovely, an' that's a fact." Katie fussed with the flounce around the hem of Isabella's gown. "A real lady."

Isabella couldn't argue with her. But this new woman she'd become was a fraud. The many petticoats beneath the silk gown rustled as she walked across the room she had shared with Katie for over two months now. "I can't say I like wearing a corset, Katie." Isabella put a hand to her middle, frowning as she took a couple of deep breaths.

Katie gave her a long-suffering look as Isabella opened the door and went into the parlour. "Don't she look a sight for sore eyes, Missus?" Katie crowed, trailing after her.

"Yes, Katie, she certainly does look grand." Selena was pulling on elbow-length gloves of a delightful pink that matched her dress. "Cheer up, Bella. This night will be perfect, have no fear. Just smile now and then, all right?" Her perfectly shaped brows arched at Isabella's frown.

"I don't feel grand, Selena. I feel like one of those fancy birds with the long tail feathers that prance about showing off. This gown is too tight. I hate showing off my bosom so. The corset stops my breath and makes my stomach hurt. Do I have to have the neckline so low?"

Isabella scowled fiercely down at the curve of her breasts, practically bouncing out of the bodice.

"Nonsense! You have a perfect pair of breasts, tantalising enough to stir the blood of any male." Selena ran a finger over Isabella's crinkled forehead. "But for tonight all you have to do is stir Fergus's blood. And gain the interest of a host of bored soldiers. With a bit of luck you'll snare a major or a captain at your first outing and be set up for the next year. Now, show me the look from beneath lowered lids that I taught you," she ordered. "And for sweet heaven's sake take that scowl off your face, you'll end up lined before you're thirty."

Isabella complied, feeling silly, as she'd done since Selena had assured her that the look was destined to bowl any man over. Inwardly she sighed as Selena fussed with her gown, ensuring that her own bosom was displayed to advantage.

"Here's the gents, Missus," Katie announced, clapping her hands as she cocked an ear. Coming to give Isabella a hug, she whispered, "Good luck then, an' knock 'em sideways!"

"I'm shaking in my shoes, Katie," Isabella confessed, wishing she were anywhere but here.

Strangely, she'd enjoyed the months of enforced privacy in Selena's house. As Katie had said that first day, they ate well, enjoyed a bath every day, and lived life with a seeming indolence that left Isabella feeling as if she'd entered a fantasy land. The nights Selena entertained Gareth, Isabella had played cards or silly games with Katie in their room. It had been easy to forget her past life; even to forget Tiger Carstairs for great stretches of time. The whole period had seemed disconnected from all that had gone before.

But there was nothing fanciful about it now. After all the weeks of lessons, preening, fussing, and primping, she was going out to begin a life that would become normal from now on. Goosebumps rose on her skin.

"That's right, you look like a woman of class." Selena's smile was strange, almost feverish, as Isabella lifted her chin and linked her fingers over her stomach. "We've kept the gentlemen waiting long enough. Good evening, Gareth darling," she turned to coo as Moreton came in.

Gareth kissed Selena's outstretched hand. "Good evening, my dear, you look stunning as usual." Then he eyed Isabella as he straightened, and his red brows lifted. "And so do you, Isabella. My, I would never have recognised you." With an admiring glance, his eyes swept over her

from her head to her toes.

"Thank you," Isabella murmured as Selena adroitly hooked him by the arm to steer him out.

"Let's hope Fergus will be suitably impressed," Selena mused, pressing her bosom against his arm.

"I'm certain of it." Gareth patted her hand and then helped her into the waiting carriage.

Isabella was thinking it very strange that this Fergus hadn't stepped down from the carriage. She soon found out why when Gareth handed her up the step with a soft smile of encouragement. A bulky man was hunched into a corner, a hand shielding his face. Obviously he had no wish to be seen by curious onlookers.

"Isabella, please make the acquaintance of Lieutenant Fergus Brunt," Gareth said. "He's a wee bit on the shy side. Doesn't want anyone to see him arriving at Selena's house, if you get my meaning. He's due to be wed at the end of the month and his future bride has a harridan for a mother, isn't that so, Fergus?" Gareth winked at his friend as he seated himself beside Selena, opposite Isabella and the reticent Fergus.

Isabella's estimation of Gareth went down a peg or two. She was secretly disgusted with both of them. "Aren't you a betrothed man yourself, Gareth?" she asked, and he sucked in a breath, shaking his head.

"Quite so, but my fiancée hasn't arrived from England yet, so I'm a lonely man at the moment." He sighed, but his grin showed no guilt.

Isabella pressed her lips together, staring at her fingers on her lap. She was so tense her hands ached. She tried to relax.

This whole business was distasteful, but now her decision was made she would have to live with it. But it was not going to be easy. She sighed, looking across the carriage. Selena was sending her a warning glance. Isabella looked away, and saw that Fergus Brunt had a distinctly lascivious glint in his pale eyes. They were settled on her breasts.

"You're a pretty wench," he murmured.

Isabella felt like a piece of prime mutton under inspection at the market as his gloating eyes ate her up.

"Thank you," she mumbled, bringing a hand up to her throat in an effort to cover some of her displayed flesh.

Selena gave her a gentle nudge on the knee, saying, "You have me to thank for delivering her to you, Fergus love. Take my word for it, if you don't snatch her up for yourself you will be on the end of a long

queue once the gentlemen of this town have seen her."

Isabella felt nausea churning inside her. Until now she'd viewed this as a bit of a lark, and it had certainly been more pleasing than being thrown on the streets to fend for herself. She owed Selena much, but now the time had come to repay her she wondered if she would be able to go through with it.

Fergus Brunt was about thirty, not much different in age to Tiger, but there the similarity ended. Fergus did his best to conceal his paunch, but he was already running to fat, and his blonde hair was thinning. He lapsed into silence, leaving Selena and Gareth to hold the conversation. Isabella shut herself off, barely hearing a word.

But she could feel the odious man's eyes on her and her skin crawled, making her feel as if she was being eaten alive by insects.

"Come along, no time for daydreaming, we've arrived," Selena announced, allowing Gareth to assist her from the carriage. Isabella put her hand in Fergus's as he helped her down, then withdrew it sharply. His palm was sweaty and hot; she felt it through the fabric of her gloves, and she caught a frightening gleam in his eye as he offered her his arm.

He sighed, then whispered dramatically, "Alas, we must show our faces here, but I would sooner be alone with you, sweet child. Have no fear, I'll be your regular caller, and I'll pay you so well you'll have no need for other men."

Isabella reared back. At least Gareth was enough of a gentleman that he never made Selena feel like a whore, but this man had successfully done that with the only sentence of any length he'd uttered.

Isabella refused to answer, and he apparently didn't expect a comment from her. Lifting her chin she turned her attention to the house they were entering. Selena had told her it was the home of a wealthy free settler. The front door was reached by a flight of steps leading to the verandah that circled the entire house. They went into the large living area, which had been cleared for dancing. The floor was highly polished and a many-candled chandelier hung from the centre beam of the vaulted ceiling. Isabella recognised the sideboard and chairs as rosewood. Selena had told her the Governor favoured the rose mahogany. Selena's own bed, dining setting and cabinets were made of the beautiful timber that came from the heavily forested area north of the Hawkesbury River.

"Welcome to my home," a bearded giant of a man roared in an earsplitting voice that made her wince. "Well, well, and who's this

choice piece of womanflesh, eh, Selena my darling? Where did you pluck this peach?" Casting bloodshot eyes over Isabella in much the same way Fergus had, he made her feel naked. She quenched a desire to cross her arms over her breasts.

"So, you like her do you, Prince? Well, you'll have to wait in line behind Fergus. Our darling man here is besotted. Isn't that so, Fergus?" Selena gave the paunchy man a sly tap on his bulbous nose.

"That's a fact, Prince, old chap. Isabella here is my property until further notice." Proving ownership Fergus clutched Isabella's arm, his free hand caressing her neck. She felt like vomiting. The game had ceased to be amusing. She might not be on the streets selling her body, but she was no less a whore for mixing in this company of leering men and preening women.

"My home is yours," Prince boomed, winking elaborately at Isabella as he wandered away.

Selena went off with Gareth and Isabella was enveloped in Fergus's arms. He wasn't a tall man and she had an urge to laugh as he began to nuzzle her neck with his wet mouth.

Sweet heaven, how soon before she could escape? But then it hit her with the force of a hammer between the eyes. There was no escape. This was the path she'd elected to follow. Selena had not forced her; this had been her choice. Hadn't she considered this way of life would be no worse than being Tiger's unpaid whore?

She glanced across the room and her eyes collided with familiar gold-flecked ones. With an oath she touched a hand to her mouth. Surely her imagination had played a trick on her. The ground seemed to shudder beneath her feet and when she looked back to the spot she saw that Tiger was gone, another fair-headed man was in his place. Of course he wasn't here; it had just been her thoughts that had conjured him up.

"Where are you? You're not with me, my dear," Fergus said grumpily, tightening his plump arm about her and pulling on the hand that was grasped in his sweaty palm. "I've paid well for your company this evening. If you don't pay me more attention I'll be asking dearest Selena for a return of my funds."

Isabella forced a smile to her lips, but her mouth felt tight and her voice came out strained when she said, "Forgive me," not really meaning it. She found she couldn't raise the slightest concern for this man. Given the choice she would rather have had Gareth's company than his. "Would you excuse me for a moment, Fergus? I find I have to refresh

myself."

Fergus let her go with a reluctant sigh. "Oh, very well, run along, but hurry back, my lovely. I have a great idea." He tapped his nose and gave her a sly look. "We will take the carriage and make haste home. Why not make the most of the night, eh? I never was a one for this dancing and prancing." He gave her a small shove in the back and chuckled.

Picking up her skirts Isabella made for the room that had been set aside for the ladies. A large man blocked her way. Keeping her head down she tried to dodge his bulk, but as she sidestepped so did he.

"Saints preserve us, you're in a tidy hurry, madam," he said with a snigger, and Isabella froze. She would know that voice anywhere. The memory of it would go with her to her grave. "I've been watching you. You have no desire to spend the evening in that dolt's company, so why not switch your alliance to me, hey?"

With a hand of steel he pulled her around until she was staring at the fob watch looped upon his waistcoat.

"What's the rush? Tarry awhile. That fool Fergus Brunt would have no notion of how to satisfy a pretty handful like you." Lifting his free hand he pressed the knuckle beneath her chin, forcing it up. "Hmm, a delectable wench," he muttered, his eyes roving over her face.

Isabella swallowed bile, her knees shaking. Dear Lord, she'd thought to never set eyes on this devil again. The smell of his body revolted her; as it had before. What was he doing here? The last time she'd set eyes on The Honourable Cecil Houghton she had been standing in the dock while he fabricated lies, blackening her character to suit his needs. What had she done to deserve this?

"Come, we'll have this next dance, wench," he ordered, and at last she lifted her eyes to give him a defiant glare. In that moment he recognised her, and his eyes narrowed into malevolent slits.

"By all the saints!" He grinned evilly. "What luck is this? The wench who tried to unman me." He waved his deformed thumb beneath her nose. "So, I have my chance for retribution. You should have hanged for your attack on me, daughter of Satan. But seeing you didn't I'll now take my chance at reprisal."

"I'm serving my sentence! Your revenge has been asserted in full!" she spat. "I was shipped to this godforsaken place because of you and your evil. I owe you nothing! Now, take your hands from me this instant."

His roar of laughter brought many eyes round to them. Fergus was

talking to the man called Prince. His eyes filled with jealous fury and he began to come their way.

"Yes, you have spirit, I'll give you that," Cecil Houghton said, his fingers biting into her flesh. He brought his face so close that Isabella could see every blue vein that patterned his blotched skin. Could feel his vile breath fanning her cheeks. With a cry of despair she turned her head away. "If my memory serves me right, too much spirit for your own good. Put up a fight, didn't you? But I like a wench with plenty of go in her. Come, let's be off." His grip on her arm tightened until she felt as if the blood had ceased to flow.

"Leave me be!" She tried to force his fingers loose.

"Take your hands off the wench." Fergus had reached their side and Isabella had to admit that his interruption was welcome, even if he was as abominable as the man who'd sent her to New South Wales in the first place.

"This wench, who has the appearance of an angel, but is in truth a daughter of the devil, is responsible for this." The thumb that sat at an odd angle was prodded under Fergus's nose. "Beware, man, she's a careful wielder of a blade. But for the grace of God, and a small miscalculation on her part I would not be here in one piece to tell the tale. Guard your manhood well."

"So?" Fergus shrugged. "What the chit did to get herself transported is no concern of mine. Just as long as she keeps her knives sheathed and her talons under control. I must admit to having a yen for a spirited woman."

"What's she worth to you, Brunt? I'll pay whatever you ask for one night in her company. I have unfinished business with her." Houghton's eyes took on the glaze of a wild creature on the hunt and his mouth went slack as he cast his eyes from her head to her slippered feet.

"'Tis my first night with the wench. Best see Selena and you can have my leavings when I tire of her. But I should warn you it may take some time before I grow sated by her charms." Fergus bestowed a twisted smile on Isabella as he patted her cheek with a sweat damp palm.

Isabella shuddered, her insides churning. All men should be tossed through the gates of hell. They stood discussing her as if she was worth nothing. Merely a vessel to satisfy their lust. Dear God! Was this what life held for her? Was her future to be spent being handed to the highest bidder? She would throw herself from a cliff before she would let this evil man touch her again.

"What say you to a turn at the gaming table, Brunt? The chit as the stakes, hmm?" Houghton suggested, finally releasing her arm.

Isabella rubbed at her sore flesh, sure she would be bruised by morning. But if this fiend managed to arrange time with her she would end up with more than a few bruises, she knew.

"I beg leave to go to the ladies' room," she said, turning her attention on Fergus, who at the moment seemed the lesser of two evils.

"Run along then, but be quick." Fergus gave her a wet smile. As she fled she heard the two of them still bartering over her.

Going through the nearest door she found herself on the verandah at the rear of the house. Tears misted her eyes as she stood in the fresh air, inhaling the scents filling the night air. A multitude of stars sprinkled the heavens. How could her life be so desolate on such a perfect night?

Leaning on the rail of the balcony she thought seriously of picking up her skirts and making off into the night, running until she came to the ocean. The thought of wading into the sea and walking until it devoured her held appeal. Yes, that was the only solution. She would sooner face the danger of natives and wild animals than the fate planned by Fergus Brunt and Cecil Houghton, bickering over her at this moment as if she was horseflesh.

"I ought to kill you now," a familiar voice said from the shadows.

Isabella was so startled she nearly fell over the rail to land on the roses below. So, she hadn't been mistaken. While she stood undecided he pushed himself away from a tree and strolled to the steps a few paces away.

"How charming you look!" His voice was devoid of emotion. "So you chose to sell your body, eh?" Climbing the steps he reached her side, and the gaze he swept over her was full of contempt. "Tell me, how do I match up to the other men? Found me wanting, eh?"

Isabella could only stare, her fingers clamped onto the rail. He looked so imposing, so daunting. Was this the man she'd lain with and cried out her love for? How could she have ever thought he might share her love? His face said it all. He held her in such contempt it made her ache with despair.

"Lost your tongue?" he drawled.

"No, my tongue is still as sharp as ever. And as for finding you wanting, you were and are all that I could expect an Englishman to be!" Her lip curled, while inside she quaked. How could he still have this effect on her? Clenching her fists, she hid them beneath the folds of her

skirt, despising the weakness that made her yearn to reach out and touch him, to feel once more his skin beneath her fingers. How she hated him for bringing forth this desire in her.

"So, you ran away from one English pig only to wallow in filth with other men who are no better." His beautiful mouth curled.

"Do I look as if I'm wallowing in filth? At least I now have fine clothes to wear. Do you like my gown?" She twirled once and his eyes narrowed.

"I gave you a fine gown and you ripped it to shreds." As if he couldn't help himself he reached out to touch her. With a soft gasp she backed away. "Do you know how much anguish you've put us all through, Bella? Why did you run away like that? We thought you dead."

"No doubt you were relieved to be rid of me. I wrote you a letter to let you know my intentions." She turned her back on him, unable to face the contempt in his eyes.

"The letter contained the barest details. Dougal was out of his mind with worry; Thelma too."

He was so close she could feel his warm breath on her nape. She shuddered. "I'm sorry for that. Both are my dear friends. I didn't wish to hurt them." Her voice held a distinct tremor.

"But you wished to hurt me. Is that why you did it, Bella? To be revenged on me?"

"You!" she spat. "You have no heart! How can someone who is filled with nothing of substance be hurt by someone else? You care for no one but yourself."

"Isabella! What in hell's name is taking you so long?" Fergus roared, bustling along the verandah. His eyes took on a menacing stare as he faced Tiger. "Well, if it isn't Tiger Carstairs. Keep your hands off the wench. She's mine." He clutched Isabella's arm.

"On the contrary, the lady's mine. She belongs to me, Brunt. Every last lock of her hair is mine." Tiger's voice was smooth, but there was no mistaking the menace beneath his level tone.

"What's going on here... Ah, Tiger! How are you my dear?" Selena swept along the verandah, Gareth at her heels. "I wondered where you were, Bella. We thought this naughty boy here had whisked you off out of sight." Playfully she tapped Fergus on the arm.

"Selena! I might have guessed you'd be behind it," Tiger said.

"Behind what?" Selena fluttered her long lashes.

"Don't act the innocent. What the hell do you mean by turning the girl into a painted harlot."

Selena sniggered. Isabella fumed. "I'm not a girl, in case you haven't noticed. And stop talking about me as if I'm not here." With hands on hips she glared at him. "I decided to stay with Selena of my own free will. She kindly bought me this gown, and she's fed and clothed me."

"Of course. Selena has always been well known for helping people in need of a roof and a meal," Tiger said with harsh sarcasm.

"Darling, do I detect a note of peevishness in your tone?" Selena retorted.

Isabella turned on her heel. "I don't have to listen to this!"

"Quite right, you don't," Fergus agreed. "We were just heading off, Selena. The wench and I are tired of dancing. We have more important games to play." He waved as he began to saunter after Isabella.

Tiger grasped the raised arm, dragging him to an abrupt halt. Fergus gasped and stared down at the hand securing him.

"The wench, as you put it, is heading nowhere with you," Tiger said. "You seem to be hard of hearing, Brunt. She belongs to me. I own her. Do you understand: she's serving her sentence out with me. I have official papers stating that I have her services until at least 1825. She ran away from me, and our dear Selena here took it on herself to convince her to follow the same downward path she treads." Tiger's teeth gritted as he outstared the smaller man.

"Don't adopt that condescending tone, Tiger Carstairs!" Selena crowed. "You were more than happy to share my bed before your insipid Irish wench took your fancy. I don't know what you did to her but she was more than happy to come under my wing."

"I'll wager she was." Tiger swore as he wagged a finger under her nose. "You planned it well I'll give you credit for that, Selena."

"Why, thank you. I must admit I am quite proud of myself." Selena preened. "The chit fell into my hands."

"Fell into your hands!" Gareth interrupted, his cheeks matching his red hair. "Selena, that's hardly fair. The poor woman was nearly killed by the horse." He turned to tell Tiger, "She was injured, you see. I took her to Selena's as it was near the spot where she fell. Isabella decided to stay of her own free will, old fellow. No one coerced her. The way I saw it she was better off there than working the wharf area, which is what she would have ended up doing if Selena hadn't taken her in."

"Yes, Selena has a big heart." Tiger sneered. He was still gripping

Fergus's arm, tightening his hold when Fergus tried to free himself.

Fergus sighed, then ran his free hand down his perspiring face. "Look, this may be of great importance to you, but I've spent good money on the wench. When you've all finished your wrangling I'd like it to be known that the chit is warming my bed this night."

"I'll unhand you, but you'll not lay another finger on the woman in question. Not as long as I have breath in my body."

"In that case I'll have to knock all the breath out of your body, won't I!" Before Fergus could raise a hand Tiger's fist knocked him to the floor.

"Unfortunately Selena will have to reimburse you, old fellow. Isabella goes with me." Tiger pointed a finger at Selena and she took a step back. "Try another trick like that, Selena, and you'll be up before the magistrate."

Tiger turned to stare at a portly man who stood watching the proceedings with interest a few paces away. He had snickered as Fergus hit the floor.

"Well, well, the wench certainly is a magnet for trouble," he remarked in a cynical drawl.

"What business have you with her?" Tiger felt anger spiralling in him. Here was another who would feel the touch of a fist if he besmirched Bella's name. Even though it was the truth; trouble drew her like a flame enticed a moth.

"The wench and I have unfinished business. I've travelled half the world to seek revenge." He jerked a misshapen thumb in front of Tiger's face, and Tiger knew in an instant that this was the man who'd instigated her downfall. Damned if he wasn't sorry she hadn't unmanned the cur as she'd intended.

"A word of warning to you all." Tiger pointed a finger at each of them. "Isabella O'Shea is bound to me for the term of her sentence. I own every hair on her head and every part of her. Any man touches her only after passing me; and I'm a formidable barrier."

Selena giggled. "She ran away from you, Tiger Carstairs, and doubtless will again. Would you watch over her every minute of every day? Seems to me you'd do well to let her go; she likes the life of a paramour, was born to it, it seems. Why not admit defeat and allow her to follow her own path?"

"I repeat, madam, Bella is mine to do with as I please. Stay away from her. All of you."

Tiger strode off, ignoring Selena's blasphemies, and the abuse Brunt hurled at his back.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tiger stormed through Prince's house, ignoring the calls of people he passed.

"Paul, the young lady who came with Selena Drake, have you seen her?" he asked a man who leaned indolently on the doorjamb, surveying the room with a bored air.

"Ah, you mean the delightful wench who arrived on lucky Fergus's arm, eh?" Paul's air of boredom vanished, his eyes taking on a gleam of interest. "The lady in question left in a mighty hurry a while ago. I asked if I could be of any assistance. Her reply wasn't meant for my dainty ears." He guffawed as Tiger charged past him.

Tiger scanned the garden, but Isabella was nowhere in sight. He cursed; she could be anywhere by now. A group of carriage-drivers sat beside one of their vehicles. "Did a young lady with dark red hair and a gown of ivory silk ask one of you to take her anywhere?" he asked them. "Is Miss Drake's driver among you?" he demanded when they looked at him vacantly.

"Aye, I dropped Miss Drake and the two Lieutenants off, sir. The wench who came with them just ran off that way." The man pointed down the driveway.

"Thank you."

"I told 'er to come back, sir. It ain't no place for a lady to be wandering about at night all alone, I told 'er, but she took no notice of me," the man shouted, but Tiger was already on his way to saddle Satan.

He set the stallion straight into a canter. He hadn't gone far when he saw a flash of silver some distance ahead. Slowing Satan, he looked left and right, but there was no one in sight. "I know you're there, Bella, so you may as well show yourself," he shouted, standing in the stirrups and peering at the trees along the side of the path. "There's snakes in there, and spiders that'll kill you. Better to come out and face me than them."

"I'd as soon face a snake as you!"

Tiger grinned humourlessly, patting Satan's neck. "At least come out and explain why you ran away from me. You owe me that much."

"I owe you nothing!"

Tiger moved Satan stealthily towards the sound of her voice. "You think not? I treated you well, Bella. Never made you think you were a

servant. Wasn't that enough?"

"Enough!" she snorted. "You treated me like a whore, Tiger Carstairs. Now, leave me alone, will you?"

"Never! Now, get out here and come home," he ordered, by now behind her. A twig cracked beneath Satan's hoof, and she turned, a hand to her mouth, then began to run.

"Stop," Tiger shouted, but she raced headlong into the night. "Christ, let's get her, boy." He dug his heels into the horse's sides and Satan followed the track she'd taken. When he was alongside her she swerved and headed off in another direction, the branches catching at her skirt and hair. By the time Tiger was close enough to lean down and catch her about the waist her hair was streaming about her shoulders.

"Let me go," she yelled, thumping at his thigh, the only place she could reach as he hauled her up and in front of him on the saddle. "I don't want to go anywhere with you. I hate you!"

"Hate all you like. But you'll come back where you belong. If you had any idea of the pain and anguish you've brought on those who care for you you'd die of shame." By now he had urged Satan into a slow canter and had her secured about the waist, pinned against his chest.

"I'm sorry for hurting Dougal and Thelma, but it couldn't be helped."

"Dougal and Thelma, eh?" Tiger growled. "What about me?"

"You? Are you saying you cared for me? You care more for Satan here than for any woman."

"Don't go too far," he snarled. "God, but you would try the patience of a saint." But even as he said the words he could sympathise with her. He pulled Satan back into a trot. "Look, about that night, Bella, I should explain –"

"What night would that be?" She glared at him over her shoulder. "I recollect no night any more spectacular than the others in my life. If you're worried about any silly romantic words I may have uttered, why, they were just words I thought you wished to hear. Now, would you turn Satan about and take me to Selena's house please. I am happy living with her."

"Like hell! I'll see you sent to the penitentiary first. You belong with me, Bella, and there you'll stay. Don't fret; your term will be up sooner than you think, then you'll be your own woman and free to whore for the whole of the King's regiment if you so desire. Until then, you stay under my roof. Is that clear?"

She remained silent. Tiger had no idea what went on in her mind.

God, had he ever had any idea how the minds of women worked? She felt so soft and feminine in his arms, and she smelt like a posy of spring flowers. Against his will his body reacted. She shifted forward as far as he would allow, her whole body stiffening.

"You're a very lovely women, especially now you've learnt how to bring out all your finer points with dear Selena's help," he said. "Can you blame me for desiring you?"

Her only response was a snort.

They rode in uncomfortable silence for a while, then he said, "So, your tormentor has followed you here."

Her shoulders lifted in a shrug. "'Tis no matter. It appears all men see me as a whore. I would have been better by far if I'd given him his way and become his harlot in England, then at least I would have been spared the humiliation of being labelled Tiger Carstairs' property. Or perhaps I should have hacked his cock off as I intended and met the hangman's noose."

The desolation in her voice touched Tiger somewhere deep inside. Dear Lord, if only he could turn back time. But would he have done things differently? 'Twas doubtful. He was no different from the other besotted fools.

They had reached the garden gate in front of his house. Tiger leant closer and said in her ear, "Run away again, Bella, and I'll bring you back and put ankle chains on you, is that clear? I have the right, you know." He lied; he would no more shackle her than he would cut his own throat, but he must threaten her in some way to keep her here. "Do you give me your word that you'll stay put now?"

"My word!" she scoffed, sliding down Satan's side and stepping back when Tiger reached down to touch her. "Would you believe my word? The promise of a slattern and a whore?"

"Bella." He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Just get along inside. Here's Thelma, she'll be glad to see you. And look now, Dougal has been roused from his sleep."

"Bella, is that you?" Dougal was struggling into his shirt as he came from the back of the house. "Well, bless me, what a sight for sore eyes. We thought you dead." He came at a run, almost throwing himself at her. But at the last minute he pulled up, staring at her as if he expected her to disappear at any moment.

"Aye, 'tis her," Tiger said, taking her arm and pushing her before him as he handed Dougal the reins. "Put Satan away for me, Dougal, then

you can ask her all the questions you like."

Isabella smiled at Dougal, then shrugged out of Tiger's hold to walk straight backed towards the verandah, where Thelma was waiting to greet her.

Isabella put the bucket down and slumped beneath an apple tree. The sun was poking its head up over the horizon, promising another hot March day. One year since they'd arrived. It didn't seem possible. How the time had flown, and how much had happened.

She gave a huge sigh, breathing in the scented air, but the nausea returned and she had to drop to her knees at the base of the tree. Her stomach gave up her breakfast. Wiping a hand across her brow she shuddered. What was she to do now? He would surely throw her out when he found out, send her to the female factory. What would Tiger want with her baby? He didn't desire her for a wife so he would want her child even less.

"Bella, how do you feel?" Dougal asked, and she quickly wiped her face on her apron and put a false smile on her face as she turned and went to sit beneath another tree. He sat beside her, staring at his dusty boots.

"Oh, I'm fine Dougal. Why do you ask?" She tugged her skirt over her knees as she pulled them up in front of her.

"I saw you bringing up your food, Bella. 'Tis useless to try and hide the truth. Everyone knows you're with child. Thelma's just waiting for you to tell her so she can shower you with attention." He toyed with a blade of grass.

"Everyone knows?" Isabella pressed her face onto her knees, groaning softly.

"Well, all except Tiger." Dougal snorted. "He just thinks you still have the sulks. What are you going to do?"

"Do? There's not much I can do, is there?" She shrugged, feeling more desolate than when she'd run away. "I'll likely get tossed out on my ear. He won't want a baby."

"He'll not throw you out, silly. He was as pleased as I was to see you back. Well, maybe not quite as pleased." He smiled and took her hand in his, gently squeezing her fingers.

Isabella wondered for the umpteenth time why she couldn't love him

as something more than a friend. "Oh, Dougal," she sighed. "What did I do to deserve such a friend."

"Is that all I'll ever be to you, Bella?"

She heard the yearning in his voice and wished with all her heart that she could be all that he wanted.

"Oh, Dougal." She reached out and stroked his cheek. His skin quivered beneath her fingers.

"It's Tiger's baby, isn't it?"

The question was asked so low that she barely caught it.

"Of course. But he'll not accept it as his. We both know that. He doesn't want anything to do with a convict. He's got his sights set higher." Isabella wiped her knuckle across her mouth.

"I'll marry you, Bella. I know you don't love me as I love you, but the feelings I have for you will do for both of us. I'll love the baby as my own because it's a part of you. If you say you intend to marry me he won't put any bars on us and you'll have someone to care for you and the child. We can stay here together where we are both welcome, then when your time is served we'll apply for a tract of land. I'll have a bit saved by then. Just think, Bella, we'll have our own place. Something we never dreamed of when we set foot on this land. What do you say? Make me the happiest man alive and I'll do my best to make a good life for you." Uncertainty and hope mingled in his eyes.

Dear Dougal, what could she say? "Can I think about your offer for a bit, Dougal?" she asked tentatively.

And meanwhile she could tell Tiger she was expecting his child. Surely he would not be able to spurn his own flesh and blood. He'd ask her to marry him and forget all his notions of wanting a wife from the gentry. No man could turn his back on his own baby.

"Right." She saw Dougal's disappointment as he stood up and touched the top of her head. "I'll give you 'til the morrow. But Bella, 'tis really the only sensible way to go."

Sensible! She felt as if she'd never been sensible in her life. As he walked off she watched his broad back. She was chasing dreams, she knew. Tiger would no doubt disown his child the same way he'd denied her his love. The man had a lump of clay for a heart. He had barely spoken to her since he'd dragged her back. Often she caught his eyes on her with lust clearly written in their depths. Well, perhaps desire would be enough; perhaps he could learn to love her in time.

Standing, she brushed at her skirt and picked up the bucket. Slowly

making her way across the orchard she shielded her eyes from the brightness of the sun. Dougal and Ginger were striding off to tend the flock on the river flats. Taking a deep breath she headed for the kitchen where she guessed Tiger would also be preparing to leave. She'd heard him telling Ginger he was heading to the wharf where a new shipment of grain, tea, coffee, tools and other necessities was being unloaded.

"How long have you known?" she heard him ask Thelma as she stood by the open door.

Thelma turned to smile at Isabella as she answered, "A week or so."

They both watched her as Isabella crossed the room and began to pick up the bundle of linen due for a scrubbing. They appeared to be waiting for her to say something. "What?" she was forced to ask when the silence grew uncomfortable.

"I hear you are with child," Tiger said, and Isabella winced at the anger that stiffened his voice.

"You knew." She bit her lip as she faced Thelma.

"I had a good idea. I was hoping you'd come to me when you were sure. You are sure, aren't you?" Thelma wiped her hands on her apron and came to put a hand on Isabella's arm.

"Yes, I'm sure. I've missed three monthly cycles. So, I'd say that's about as sure as I can get." She heard the note of bitterness in her voice. Tiger had gone very still.

"Three months, you say?"

There was a slight turn to his lip that Isabella couldn't quite make out. Surely he wasn't angry with her? "Aye. 'Tis all your doing. Is it perhaps you disclaim your own child." With head held high she faced him, her shaking fingers hidden beneath the linen.

"My own ...!" Uncertainty flickered across his gold flecked eyes, quickly replaced by scorn. "Come now, do you take me for a fool? It could be the spawn of any number of men. How many bedded you in the time you were at Selena's? Ten? Or was Fergus the first? Will you let him know he's to be a father?"

"Tiger!" Thelma looked at him as if she'd never seen him before.

"'Tis yours," Isabella stated simply. She felt the colour leave her cheeks. "I lay with no other man, not Fergus, nor anyone. The night you brought me back was to be my coming out, so to speak. Selena put a lot of time and effort into turning me into a ... well, we all know what she turned me into. But on my word, I have never been with any man but you. And that English pig who violated me."

"Your word!" Biting out a rough curse he turned away, thumping his fist into his palm. "You expect me to believe you? I'd have to be out of my mind!"

"Tiger, if Bella says it's so, then it's so. Can't you see the truth?" Thelma turned appealing eyes on him.

"It's a trick, Thelma." His eyes narrowed as he looked from one to the other of them. "The wench thinks to trap me into marrying her by claiming I sired her brat. Well, let me tell you, the sun will drop from the sky before I'd do that."

"I have no wish to trap you." Isabella drew herself up straight and walked over to stand a pace from him. She saw his Adam's apple move as he swallowed hard. In that moment she hated him. "Dougal is willing to marry me. He knows who has fathered this child, yet he's willing to take on another man's bastard. And seeing as you're my master I need your permission to wed. So, do I have it?"

Indecision flashed briefly across his eyes, but was soon replaced by steely intent. "So Dougal's willing to play the fool, is he? Well then, let him have you, and to hell with you both!" He turned away abruptly, plunging his hands into his pockets.

"Tiger, don't let them do this!" Thelma pleaded, her voice breaking. "You know it's your child. They'll end up as miserable as can be, for she's made no bones of her feelings for him."

He stared at Isabella as if he could see right through her. The coldness in his eyes made her want to flinch, but she stood firm and still, holding his gaze.

"I know no such thing, Thelma. You have my blessing, and may you get all you deserve." With that he turned on his heel and walked out.

"Oh Bella, you poor child," Thelma cried, going to where Isabella had slumped into a chair, her face in her hands, her shoulders heaving with sobs.

"'Tis his and we all know it. He does too, but he's so stubborn he'll not admit it in this life. Dougal is a good man, he'll do well by you, have no fear."

"That's what worries me more than anything, Thelma. He's too good for me. He'll regret it, I know he will."

"There now," Thelma crooned. "He'll be happier than a dog with two tails, you'll see. And in a while you'll come to see that 'tis all for the best."

"Best for who?" Isabella saw the truth in Thelma's eyes despite her

soothing words.

If she wed Dougal the marriage would be doomed to failure, and they both knew it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Her wedding day! Like a ball rolling down a hill, once the momentum had begun it had been impossible to halt the progress of the preparations. Like a woman in a trance she had drifted through the days leading up to this one.

Quietly opening the door Isabella stepped out into the yard. The sun was a tiny glimmer on the horizon, sending rays of pink and grey sweeping into the sky. It was blessedly cool after a long sultry night.

She'd tossed and turned in the wider bed that Tiger had surprised her by purchasing for her and Dougal. The cramped bedroom was more stifling than ever and her night had been plagued with the realisation that from this day onwards she would share it with her husband.

Suppressing a sob she made her way to the water barrel. Sticky and uncomfortable, she had decided to bathe before the others began to stir, in the small alcove beside the barrel, where the men usually washed. Thelma and Isabella normally carried water inside, but this morning, probably because of the overpowering feeling of being stifled all night, she had an urge to be in the fresh air.

A flash of white caught her eye as she rounded the side of the house. Isabella pulled up short, her drying cloth clutched to her chest when she realised with a shock that it was Tiger. She turned to retreat, but he called, "Who's there? Is that you Dougal?" She stood as rigid as a statue. Her hope that he wouldn't notice her, so she could slip away, was foolish, for of course he saw her.

"Bella, what the hell are you doing out here?" There was an uneven edge to his soft question, and she blinked as he faced her. He was naked, except for a piece of towelling that he held in front of him to shield his private parts.

Turning to flee, she tripped, then was brought up short by his hand on her wrist. With a jerk he pulled her round to face him. The towel had fallen and her own cloth dropped from her fingers. He seemed unworried by the nakedness which was doing strange things to Isabella's insides.

"I thought to bathe out here. It's so lovely and cool, and it's been so hot all night." She refused to meet his stare, instead gazing at the golden

hair arrowing down his broad chest to circle his navel.

"Aye, it's been hot," he murmured. There was a strange note in his voice and she lifted her chin to look him in the eye, then wished she hadn't when she saw the heat there. "Find it hard to sleep, did you? I must say I haven't been sleeping too well myself lately. What do you suppose it is keeping us awake, eh, Bella?"

"Let me go," she pleaded.

While talking he had stepped closer. So close that she could feel the heat coming off his body. Pain sliced through her when she recalled how it had felt pressed against her own softer flesh. How he had murmured words of encouragement when she had tentatively reached out to touch it, to run her fingers through that springy hair now beneath her captured hand.

"I am. Letting you go, I mean. I'm letting Dougal have what should rightfully have been mine."

She hated the sneer in his voice. "I was never yours!" She tried to sound defiant but was ashamed of the huskiness in her voice.

"Oh yes you were, dear heart, you were mine before you were anyone else's. And don't forget it."

"I've forgotten it long ago."

His laugh was bitter as he pressed her to his body. With a small cry she struggled against him, but it only served to arouse him more.

"You'll never forget it as long as you live. Never forget the taste of me or the smell of me, as I'll never forget the experience."

Like a summer breeze his warm breath drifted over her face.

"Why are you doing this to me?" she asked in a hoarse whisper. "You seem to forget that you rejected me. Spurned me, drove me away."

Tiger swore, then bent his head until his lips hovered above her mouth. "Bella," he said on a sigh.

If she hadn't known better she would have said his tone was one of regret.

"I didn't reject you. I just let you know where we stood. You come from the same background as me. 'Tis stupid to think that we could ever make a success of marriage. I'm too selfish and I have a clear idea of what I want. Top of the list of priorities is a wife with a title or good standing. 'Tis the only way I'll ever be accepted truly by the nobs here in the colony."

"So, we're back to where we began. I'm good enough to bed but not good enough to wed!"

Tiger knew he should let her go. Knew he was behaving like a debaucher of the worst kind. But with her slim soft body so close he found he wanted nothing more than to lay her down here on the dusty ground and cover her body with his, to bury himself deep inside her. He stifled her small sob with his lips, devouring her.

She wrenched free. "Stop this. Let me be! Damn you to hell and back! Let me go, Tiger Carstairs!"

He suddenly stood back a pace. She prepared for flight, but he pulled her close again, his hands moving to her hips.

"Don't," she whispered as he deliberately lifted her nightgown. Then with a swift movement he slid it up and over her head, letting it drop to the ground. Staring down at her white body he trailed his fingers where his eyes had wandered, from her breasts to her hips then lower. With an instinctive gesture of preservation Isabella covered her breasts, but he pushed her arms down to her sides.

"You're a slut, a whore. So why would you mind me sampling your wares?"

Before Isabella could utter a word he was kissing her again with such ferocity that the breath left her lungs.

"Tiger," she heard herself whisper.

But his breathing was harsh now and she had the impression that though he'd heard her he had disconnected himself; was in another place where only his senses ruled.

Tiger knew he should stop, but was powerless. This woman aroused such a wave of emotions in him; passions that frightened him. Many women had evoked his desire, his lust, but never anything so close to ... Love? The word hovered at the edge of his consciousness, but he forced it back. No, he knew nothing of such deep emotions.

How he wished ... No, no sense in wishful thinking. She'd made her choice, and so had he. Oh, but how he longed for just one more chance. . . . "Bella," he murmured, only then realising she had gone soft and yielding, had wrapped her arms about his waist, was pressing her cheek to his chest. He dragged in a shuddering breath as her fingertips skimmed over the flesh of his back and down to his buttocks.

What happened next was inexplicable. Without thought of why or how, they were on the ground, in each other's arms, tasting, touching, kissing as if they'd always been lovers, always shared each other thus. He'd never felt like this before, filled with such an overwhelming mix of feelings. Lust overran tenderness, yet there was nothing lustful about

the way they came together; it was as if it was ordained, had always been meant to happen.

"Tiger," he heard her say in a dreamy voice that seemed to come from far away, as he entered her, possessing her body as she possessed his soul. Only then did it hit him like a blow to the gut what he was doing. The woman was due to wed Dougal this very day and he'd spurned her because he didn't trust her.

Ah, but she was so sweet, so giving, everything a man could desire in a woman. He shouted her name as he found his release, and as she whispered his name over and over like a chant he felt a pain as sharp as a knife wound in his chest.

Rolling away from her he covered his eyes with an arm. Disgust and shame filled him, revolted him.

"Tiger." Tentatively she touched his shoulder.

"Go prepare for your wedding," he groaned.

"But ..."

"No buts." His head rolled from side to side in the dirt. "You will wed Dougal. The man is willing to take you. You'd break his heart if you refuse him now. Nothing's changed between us, Bella, can't you see."

"Oh, yes." Reaching for her nightgown she pulled it over her head. A great lump was settling like a rock somewhere in her middle. Shivering as if about to freeze with the ice invading her soul she sneered, "Nothing's changed. I'm still a whore, good enough to sate your body on, but not good enough to be a wife to you. Well, let me tell you, I would rather wed a kind and gentle man like Dougal who treats me with respect, than shackle myself to you. And if you lay a finger on me again, ever, so help me God, I'll kill you!"

She ran then, across the garden, through the gate, across the home paddock, then in and out of the fruit trees.

Tiger stood up and watched her until she was a white blur at the far side of the orchard. Vaguely he wondered if she would return this time. Running a hand over his head he gave a convulsive shudder. Never mind about her killing him, he felt capable of killing himself. He was the lowest of the low, no better than the scum she had often named him. Sweet Jesus! If Thelma ever suspected how he'd ravaged her she would likely lay a rolling pin to his head. He was no better than Malloy.

He returned to his bathing, but all the water in the world couldn't wash her sweet scent from his body. It lingered in his nostrils, enticing, enthralling him. He suspected it always would.

In childish daydreams Isabella had imagined being wed in a great church such as one she'd been inside in London long ago. A huge vaulted place where footsteps echoed on the stone floor and the priest stood before the bride and her man in a flowing white and purple robe. There had never been a clear picture of the man who would stand by her side swearing to honour and love her until his dying day. But in the darkest corner of her mind she now knew he would be tall and straight with hair and eyes of gold.

She gave Dougal a diffident smile. It was unbearably hot in the small chapel and she feared that at any moment she would have to run outside to bring up her breakfast.

Dougal looked uncomfortable and nervous in the new trousers and shirt Tiger had bought him for this occasion. There had been something different about him all day. Over breakfast he'd kept throwing her odd looks that she could only interpret as anger. It was very strange and for a while she'd had the feeling he was about to tell her he couldn't go through with the ceremony. That thought dismayed her, even as she'd hoped it would be true. Then her stupid imagination had Tiger stepping in and taking his place.

Fool! When would she learn?

No, she was standing beside Dougal in a gown of pink muslin, also provided by Tiger. For all she cared it could have been sackcloth. Inside, a little voice cried out for him to step forward, to shout the priest down, to insist that this farce of a marriage be stopped, for the woman standing before the altar was carrying his child and so should be marrying him.

But things like that only happened in dreams, and the time for such nonsense was over. With bemused eyes she watched as Dougal pushed the gold band onto her wedding finger. She wanted to clench her fist, to refuse to accept it. Dougal's eyes held a look of disbelief. Perhaps he was having second thoughts. But as the priest joined their hands and pronounced that she was his wife she knew it was a certainty; she and Dougal were wed. For better or worse.

Thelma came to give them both a hug. "Bless the two of you. Be happy," she said to Isabella. But the look in her eyes said she had little hope for such an eventuality.

Ginger cleared his throat. "Lord, but I only hope you'll be half as

happy as Thelma and me," he said, also hugging Isabella awkwardly, before shaking Dougal's hand as if working the pump.

Tiger wordlessly thumped Dougal on the back before he too shook his hand. Then he stood before Isabella, his hands cupping her shoulders. She refused to meet his eyes. Every part of her body was shaking, and she knew if they didn't get out into the sunshine soon she would make a fool of herself and vomit among the pews.

"Let's get out of here," Tiger said, frowning as she swallowed hard. "I think Bella's about to be sick."

"Thank you, sir," Dougal turned to say to the priest, then he took Isabella's arm and led her outside into the sunshine.

Tiger had already taken care of the reverend's fee. In fact Tiger had covered all the expenses. Isabella knew this stuck in Dougal's craw, but there was nothing to be done about it. He was her owner, so presumed to take the place of her father, assuming all responsibility.

Dougal helped Isabella into the wagon, beating Tiger to it when he offered her aid. Once they were seated though, Dougal dropped her hand as if it was a hot cinder.

It was a quiet ride home in the wagon, fraught with tension. Thelma had decorated the pony's bridle with ribbons and flowers, but apart from that and the small posy Isabella held no one would have suspected it was a wedding party. Ginger drove so that Dougal could sit in the back with Isabella, but from the few words that passed between them Dougal might as well have sat up the front.

Isabella suspected shyness accounted for Dougal's withdrawn look and uncomfortable silence. If she hadn't known better she would have thought him sullen, but Dougal had never been moody.

"Well, how does it feel to be a married man?" Ginger asked, reaching behind him to slap Dougal's shoulder.

Dougal gave Isabella a sidelong glance before answering, "I must say I didn't ever think this day would come. Never reckoned I'd be the one to win Bella's hand, Ginger. I'm a happy man this day."

But something about his manner didn't proclaim happiness. In fact Isabella had the odd feeling that he was as miserable as she was.

How odd men were. Dougal knew she didn't love him. Knew she carried another man's child. Likely guessed that she would probably love Tiger forever despite the way he'd treated her. Yet here he was, still prepared to be her husband. Instead of instilling love and pride in her, it did the opposite. She had never felt scorn or disdain for him, but those

feelings were uppermost in her now, just behind the disgust she held for herself.

When they reached home, Ginger said, "We'll get changed and head off back to the flock," as they all climbed from the wagon.

Tiger said, "Time for a glass or two to toast the happy couple. Let's get inside now. I'll unhitch the pony later, Dougal."

As far as Isabella could tell his face and voice were devoid of any emotion. Dougal nodded but didn't look at Tiger as he took Isabella's elbow and led her inside in a proprietary way that set her teeth on edge. It hit Isabella then that Dougal hadn't spared Tiger a glance all day.

They trooped inside and Tiger took down a flagon of rum from the dresser. Pouring a generous portion into five goblets he handed one to each of them.

"To the happy pair. May they be blessed with many pleasurable years together. Good health and happiness." Tiger watched Isabella over the rim of his goblet as he put it to his lips.

"Good health and happiness," Thelma and Ginger echoed, swallowing their drink.

"You're not drinking, Bella," Tiger said softly, lifting his golden brows.

"I don't think it would be good for the babe." She tossed her head defiantly.

"Ah, yes, the baby. We must take care of the little fellow, mustn't we, eh?" His lips curved in a smile that held no mirth. She felt like slapping it off his cruel mouth.

"I must," she agreed, returning his stare arrogantly.

"Ah well, I'll just nip and get changed," Dougal said, rather loudly, putting his empty goblet down and wiping a hand across his mouth. Throwing a scowl Tiger's way, he then gave Isabella such a puzzling look that she reared back. Perhaps she was imagining things but he did seem angry enough to burst. Which was so unlike Dougal that she frowned after him as he left the room.

"I'll change too," Thelma said, following Ginger out.

"Alone at last," Tiger said softly.

"I'm going to take off this fancy gown and get into my plain work clothes," Isabella told him, edging around the table. He took a step closer, blocking her path.

"It's tradition to kiss the bride. You haven't yet given me a kiss, my sweet."

"I told you. Touch me and I'll kill you."

"Come now, Bella, don't you wish to thank me for your delightful gown and the fine clothes I bought for your husband?" Reaching out he ran a finger down the front of the bodice, lingering on a ribbon that fell just above her breast.

Isabella flinched. "Thank you? The words would choke me. I never asked you for anything and only take them because I have no other choice. After all, you own me." She shoved his hand away.

"And don't you forget it. Now, give the man who owns you a kiss of thanks."

He moved swiftly and before Isabella could make her escape he had her clasped in his arms, one hand at her spine, the other behind her head, positioning her for his kiss.

Isabella thought of screaming. Thelma was not far away, but as she opened her mouth to yell Tiger swooped. Isabella did the first thing that came to mind. She bit his lip.

"Ouch! You wretch!" He stepped back, stroking his tongue over the drop of blood that she'd drawn.

"I may not be able to kill you, but I'll fight you in any way I can, Tiger Carstairs. Leave me be!"

"Jesus!" He turned away, and Isabella saw his shoulders heave as he dragged in a deep breath. "What do you do to me? You turn me into a man I hardly recognise."

"What do I do to you?" she sneered. "You've ruined my life, and you ask that. I wish you'd left me to Malloy. At least there I knew what life had in store for me."

"You have your new husband, Bella, now get out of my sight before I do something I'll regret."

"What? Such as beat me? You've already raped me and put a babe in my belly, what else is there but killing me?"

"Rape? Never that Bella." His tone softened as he turned to stare at her from beneath lowered brows. "Accuse me of all else, but never that. And please don't start that nonsense about the child again."

"The babe will be born in September, you'll see. And it'll look like its father. You!" Unable to face his scorn she ran to her room. Only it wasn't her room any more, but her and her husband's.

As she was stepping out of her dress a soft tap came on the door. Before she had a chance to ask who was there Dougal came in.

He eyed her silently as he put his new clothes on the end of the bed,

then said, "I'll just leave these with you, will I, Bella. I ... I'll best be off. See you later on." He shuffled about a bit, then left the room in a rush.

With a ragged sigh she slumped down beside his new trousers. What had she done? There was no going back now. Damnation on Tiger Carstairs! May he rot in hell, for she was already in a hell of his making.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Isabella stared down at her marriage bed and ran a hand over the starched, crisp sheet Thelma had, that morning, helped her put on.

Her friend's eyes had been sympathetic as she'd said, "Make the most of a bad job, Bella. Dougal's a good man, better for you by far than Tiger."

"I know that, Thelma. That great English dolt can go and jump into a river and never surface as far as I'm concerned!"

"Aye," Thelma had agreed, knowing they both lied.

Now Isabella shuddered as she waited for Dougal to join her. He was bathing out the back. Tiger had ridden off after the evening meal. Thank the Lord! Isabella didn't know how she would have borne sharing Dougal's bed for the first time with Tiger on the other side of the wall, so near, yet so far.

How could she have let him make love to her again this morning? She must be the whore he'd named her for giving in to him so easily. But it would never happen again, she swore. The door creaked behind her and she gave a startled cry.

"Did I frighten you?" Dougal asked as he came into the room, closing the door after him. "Sorry I took so long." He hovered just inside the room, looking young. And very dark.

Isabella bit her lip. For all she cared he could have taken all night. Goodness, she had to pull herself together. Dougal was her husband and he had rights. Feeling numb, she stretched out on the bed, pulling the sheet up to her chin.

Apart from trousers Dougal wore nothing else. She'd seen him without a shirt before so for the life of her couldn't understand why his bare chest made her feel intimidated. Black hair curled thickly over his front, tapering to his stomach, contrasting dramatically with Tiger's fine golden body hair.

Sitting beside her he reached out to finger a lock of her hair, his eyes meeting hers for the first time since he'd come in. Her toes and fingers clenched as his knuckle brushed her cheek.

"You look beautiful," he said softly, reaching to pull the sheet from

her fingers. For a moment she resisted, but then realised how foolishly she was behaving, and allowed him to pull it back. "Let me look at my wife."

His voice had a strange hard edge to it that made her suddenly nervous.

"Please?" Without her consent he began to undo the front of her nightgown. Isabella clutched at his wrist as he fiddled awkwardly with the ribbons.

"Wait," she pleaded.

He ignored her, working his way down painstakingly until every tie was released, his eyes intent, absorbed on his task. Then with a jerk he pulled the sides of the bodice apart, gasping as he laid her breasts bare to his gaze.

"I've waited an' waited, Bella. The waiting time is over." As he spoke he began to fondle her, lowering his head to suckle her. "You're mine now, an' I'll touch you, an' look at you as much as I want." His voice was hoarse and while he fondled one breast he pulled on the other greedily with his mouth.

Isabella willed herself to relax. She owed him that much. Waiting for the ache of longing that always shafted through her at Tiger's touch she was sorely disappointed. All she felt was revulsion. Biting back a moan of repugnance she pushed at his shoulders. He just groaned and tugged her nightdress lower to expose her belly.

"Dougal," she bit out. "I don't feel like this. I'm sorry. It must be because of the baby. Could we please just lie beside each other for a while." She hated the pleading note in her voice.

"Don't feel like it!" He stood up and began to take off his trousers, all the time staring down at her, his eyes roving over her bare breasts. "Because of the baby, you reckon, eh?"

Isabella nodded, pulling the fronts of her gown together as he turned to hang his trousers behind the curtain. He frowned when he saw that she'd covered herself, leaning over her and uncovering her again with little effort. Then with one easy movement he peeled the gown down her body and tossed it aside. She tried to cover her nakedness with her arms. His eyes were blazing now with a heat she recognised as lust.

His manhood was swollen and she shifted her eyes to his face as he knelt beside her, pressing it on her thigh. "Well now, if it's the baby that's turning you off making love with your husband, kindly tell me how you could lay with the great Tiger on this very morn; the day you

was to wed me." He shouted the last sentence. "I ought to whip you!"

A man she didn't know was glaring at her.

"I ... How do you ...? What do you mean?" she whispered as he loomed over her.

"Spare me the lies, Bella. I saw you with my own eyes, giving yourself willingly to the great Tiger. He's right, you're a whore! Damn you!"

"Then how could you wed me?" she cried. "Knowing I made love with him, how could you bring yourself to go ahead with the marriage?" She scrambled away from his hands as they began to wander over her belly and up to her breasts again. "You're no better than me." Tears coursed down her cheeks, but he ignored them. He pulled her back to his side, gripping her arms as he caressed her thighs, outside and in between her legs.

"'Tis simple. I always wanted you. He doesn't want you for anything other than to satisfy his lust. Well, now you're legally my wife an' if he so much as puts a finger on you I'll kill him! Even if I swing for it, I'll do it. You're mine, Bella."

"How can you say such things?" she croaked. Dougal, her friend, had disappeared.

"Easy." His fingers were delving inside her as he spoke and she began to shake. He didn't appear to notice her revulsion. Or if he did didn't care. "An' Tiger knows how I feel, don't fear."

"I'll not give myself willingly, Dougal," she said through stiff lips, her insides shrivelling. Pressing her legs together as tight as she was able she tried to wriggle away from him, without success. He pressed harder with his fingers and she bit back a cry of pain.

"No matter. I'll take you, Bella. It could have been different." His voice broke. "I loved you with all my heart, an' you shoved that love down my throat." He threw his head back as if in some kind of agony. "I know it's his babe in your belly, but I'm not so proud that I won't take his leavings. Now be still." A large hand pressed onto her belly, and she tried to shift it. But he covered her body with his, grunting when she thumped at his shoulders.

"Don't carry on like a virgin, Bella," he hissed. "How many men did you have while you was off with that Drake whore, eh?"

"None. Dougal, I've lain with no man but Tiger. Please believe me," she sobbed. "Don't do this!"

"I must. Now relax." His order came through gritted teeth as he

began to push into her.

"No!"

Her scream echoed from wall to wall of the tiny room. Isabella fought with every ounce of strength within her. "This is rape, Dougal," she cried. "I thought you cared for me!"

"I did. But you tossed my love to the dogs time an' time again. I must have you. You belong to me. Now be still, for pity's sake," he growled.

But she could not, would not, allow him to violate her this way. "Get off me!" She bucked, and he cursed again.

"Never!"

Hitting out with her fists she caught him around the ears and shoulders. He grunted, rearing back onto his haunches. "Lie still, or so help me I'll bash you," he shouted, grabbing her shoulders and shaking her mercilessly.

Isabella brought her knee up and caught him where his manhood pulsed.

He sucked in a breath, warning, "Why, you wildcat, do that again, an' I'll ..."

She cut him off with a fist to his mouth. That really angered him, and he threw her back, pressing her down with his weight until she felt she couldn't breathe. Pinning her arms above her head he started to press inside her again. Isabella screamed, an agonising sound that gurgled up from her throat.

"Jesus! Shut up," he roared, and when that didn't stop her he clasped both of her wrists in one hand and brought the other back to slap her full across the mouth with the back of it.

The door was suddenly thumped back on its hinges and Tiger yelled, "What in heaven's name is going on in here?"

Dougal was so deep in the throes of his release that for a minute he ignored Tiger. But as he groaned and spilled his seed into Isabella he turned his face to stare up at Tiger, who stood at the end of the bed. Never had Isabella seen such a look in Tiger's eyes. If she hadn't known better she would have thought he was ready to murder Dougal.

"Get out," Dougal ordered hoarsely, rolling onto his back. Isabella tried to cover herself; futilely, for the sheet was caught beneath Dougal. A dark tide of shame washed over her and she moaned, wishing she were dead.

Tiger left, but a moment later returned with a cloth, which he handed

to Isabella. "Wipe the blood off your mouth," he ordered, his face grim as death as he glared at Dougal, who still lay with his legs spread, flaunting his nakedness.

"Cover yourself." Reaching down, Tiger picked up her nightgown and passed it to her. Isabella caught a fleeting look of pain on his face before he masked it. "You too, man." With an angry oath he dragged the sheet from under Dougal and flung it over him.

Dougal wiped a hand over his face, then sat up, the sheet draped over his lower body. "This is all your fault!" He shook a fist at Tiger.

"My fault? Come, man, surely you can't blame me for your behaviour. You acted no better than an animal!"

Dougal muttered a vile word and Isabella wondered where her shipboard friend had gone; the one who was always so patient, caring, and devoted. Never had she heard him use such language.

"If you'd controlled your lust she would have come willingly to me," Dougal went on. "But no, the great lover Tiger Carstairs has to win every willing female in these parts. Why couldn't you leave well alone? She would have grown to love me one day." Dropping his head into his hands he groaned.

Tiger pounced on him, dragging him up by the shoulders. The sheet fell to the floorboards, but neither man seemed to notice. Tiger's exclamation was like a growl as he bit out, "You can't make anyone love you if they haven't the feeling in them. You're a fool Dougal. Why didn't you take it gently, then perhaps she would have grown to care for you? But let me tell you I'll have no man in my house who takes a fist to a woman. Put one finger on her in anger again and I'll have you flogged. And this isn't an idle threat, believe me! You may be a free man, but I'll still see that you get what you deserve."

Dougal stumbled, falling onto his hands. Standing, he took his trousers from the peg and tugged them on, sneering, "Have no fear! I've no more fancy to share her bed. Lord knows why I've pined after her all this time." He gave Isabella a look of repugnance. "You're welcome to the trollop!" He stormed out of the room.

For long moments Tiger stood looking at Isabella's hunched form. She looked like a trapped animal. Feeling like the lowest form of animal himself he went and touched a finger to her shoulder. She shrank back as if he'd hit her.

"I'm sorry," he said, but she curled into a ball and for all he knew hadn't even heard him.

Dougal was right. This was his fault. But who'd have thought that such a kindly person would turn into a monster. Perhaps all men had a streak of the animal in them. Even one as seemingly subdued as Dougal.

Even while he deplored Dougal's actions some dark part of him revelled in the knowledge that Isabella had given herself willingly to him, yet fought not to yield to her new husband. Something wasn't right, for if she'd grown acquainted with whoring while at Selena's then surely she would have no problem coupling with Dougal, who'd always so blatantly adored her.

Could he have made a horrendous mistake?

"Bella, are you all right?" he asked quietly.

Wiping the cloth across her eyes she turned slowly to face him. A sneer twisted her beautiful mouth. "Aye. But I'd be much better if I was miles away from here. I wish more than anything in life that I didn't have to set my eyes on your hateful face again. And I don't wish to be a wife to Dougal. Can you get me unmarried as swiftly as you arranged for me to be wed?"

"I can't do that, Bella, as you well know." Tiger shrugged. "If it's any consolation I hate myself just as much as you do."

"Impossible!" She turned her back on him. Waiting a moment more, he slowly left the room. Her muffled sobs tore at his heart.

"What a mess," Thelma said as he entered the kitchen.

"Thelma! What are you doing up?" Tiger dragged out a chair and sat down opposite her, resting his elbows on the table. Wiping his palms down his jaw he shivered.

"Could anyone have slept through her screams? I was going to her when I heard you in there." Thelma lifted a hand to push back her hair wearily. "I thought you intended to stay away all night."

"I had. But then I got to thinking it was useless to shy away from my own home. As it worked out 'twas a good thing I returned. I would never have dreamed a man could change so much, Thelma."

"A man who's eaten up with jealousy can be driven to all sorts of things. Even murder." Thelma gave him a thunderous look.

Tiger ran his fingers through his hair, then rubbed at a temple where a sharp pain was beginning to throb. "I thought his love would be enough for the two of them."

"You're a fool, Tiger. I can't believe you're so blind. Like you said to him, no one on this earth can force their feelings. You've done wrong by her. But 'tis no use crying over spilt milk. What's going to happen

now?"

Tiger shook his head despairingly. "By all that's holy, I'm sure I don't know. Perhaps she'll come round."

"Perhaps that grate over there'll take wings and fly." Thelma pushed herself up.

Tiger noticed her wince as she dragged in a laboured breath.

"D'you think I should go to her?" Undecided she glanced at the door at the rear of the kitchen. Isabella was still sobbing softly.

"Who knows, Thelma." He grimaced. "You're a woman, you work it out. I'm going to take my flagon to my room and try to drown out all thoughts of what happened this night."

"Aye. Typical."

Tiger chose to ignore that as he picked up the rum flask and strode to his room. But unfortunately the rum did nothing to drown out the sound of Bella's sobs from the next room.

He'd intended to stay away for fear of what the sounds of their coming together would do to him, never suspecting her plaintive sobs would keep him from sleep and tear his heart asunder. Something had brought him home, some premonition of disaster. The cards had failed to hold his interest. In fact he'd lost on every hand he'd been dealt, his concentration on the game had been so lacking.

Contrary to what she thought of him he did have a heart and it was aching fit to break. God, how could he have been so arrogant? And so stupid!

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

JUNE 1819

"You can't go on like this, Bella," Thelma chided, six months into Isabella's pregnancy.

"Like what?" Isabella knew quite well what her friend meant but she deliberately chose to pretend she didn't feel so tired, bored and impatient with everything and everyone. Her whole world had shrunk to encompass nothing but the child growing inside her.

"You know what I mean, it seems like every shred of energy and love of life has left you, girl. How's it going with Dougal now? The two of you seem to have worked through your differences."

Isabella's mouth twisted in a travesty of a smile. "Aye," she agreed. She had allowed Dougal into her bed, but the atmosphere was so strained between them that even the placid Ginger noticed it. "We don't seem to talk any more. That way we don't argue. I gained a husband, Thelma, and lost a friend."

"He hasn't hit you again, has he?" Thelma eyed Isabella warily, her arms crossed.

"Oh no. I don't know for sure if he's scared that Tiger will keep his word and have him arrested, or if he simply doesn't care enough to raise a hand or his voice in anger. Poor Dougal. I can see his side of things, you know. I should never have let him wed me." She stared down at the simple gold band on her finger, twisting it around. "I wouldn't be the first mother to have no husband. The colony's alive with bastard children."

"Tiger should have taken on his responsibilities." Thelma made a sound of disgust as she shook her head. "He should have married you."

"I wouldn't marry him if he was the only man alive. It would have turned out a bigger mess than it is now. He would have ended up hating me even more than he does now."

"He don't hate you, girl!" Thelma contradicted, her eyes filled with sadness.

"No?" Isabella shrugged, rubbing her neck. "Perhaps you're right. He don't care enough to have such strong emotions where I'm concerned." For Tiger ignored her, if anything. He was rarely home

these days, and when he was he treated her with an indifference that was soul-destroying.

"Tiger's a man who manages to cover his feelings well, Bella. Don't think he don't care, 'cause I'd say he bears the scars of what's happened same as you."

"Huh! If he really cared a fig, Thelma, he'd own up that it's his baby that's kicking inside of me right now." Tenderly she stroked her belly.

"Is the little one on the move again?" Thelma grinned as she came to put a hand on Isabella's swollen stomach. "Bless me if that isn't the liveliest child I've ever felt."

Though she smiled Thelma's eyes were filled with wistful longing. Isabella knew she'd prayed for a baby of her own, but her prayers had not been answered.

"Isn't it an energetic so and so!" They laughed, their heads together.

The kitchen door opened and Tiger strode in. He came to an abrupt halt, his eyes riveted on their hands, still on Isabella's stomach.

"The baby's a lively one," Thelma said, grinning.

Tiger turned abruptly away, his attention apparently caught by a flock of parrots flying past the window.

"Come and have a feel?" she invited, ignoring the scowl Isabella tossed at her.

"'Tis stopped now," Isabella declared, pulling her apron down and turning back to the peas she'd been podding.

Tiger gave Thelma a quick glance, then went through to his room. Tossing his hat on the floor he slumped on the side of his bed and ran his fingers through his sweat dampened hair.

"Damn her to hell," he muttered when he realised his hands were trembling. He'd actually yearned to put his palm over her swollen belly; had felt a great longing to feel the baby stirring inside her.

The woman had grown more beautiful as her shape had changed. Her hair was lustrous, as were her green eyes. The eyes of a temptress. Whether she knew it or not each look she threw his way was filled with the same hot unbidden emotion that swirled inside him. This dark and terrible longing was engulfing his deeper feelings. Damn it, but often he awoke in a fever of heat, Bella's name on his lips.

He spent too many hours away from his home. But since she'd let Dougal back into her room, and obviously into her bed, he was ravaged by jealousy when he heard the muted sounds of their coupling on the other side of the wall.

Fool! Why pine for something you willingly tossed away? Getting up impatiently, he bent to retrieve his hat. She could be sharing his bed now if he'd been able to take what she'd offered. No, he could never be sure. What would a relationship without trust be like? Better this way by far.

He'd started courting Mistress Prudence Bacon. Her name suited her, she was the biggest prude in the colony. Her mother watched over her like a hawk protecting its fledgling. What a joke! Even if the girl had been inclined to accept his advances he had no desire to offer her more than a chaste kiss on the cheek. Even that small show of affection seemed to send the maiden into a twitter of nervousness. He knew he scared her to hell, but all the better. As far as he was concerned once he had the ring on her finger he would leave her to her own devices, knowing she would be more than content to see him go his own way.

"Dougal, wake up." Isabella gritted her teeth as a pain quivered through her. "'Tis time, I think."

Dougal shot to a sitting position, his eyes wide. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure." She wasn't really but she was scared, though she'd not admit it to him. He was already out of bed and pulling on his trousers. He reached for his shirt and began to push his arms into the sleeves, staring at her as if he thought she might deliver the babe that instant.

"You'd best get Thelma," Isabella instructed as she put her feet to the floor, watching Dougal as he jumped about on one leg, pulling on a boot. "Don't get in a state. Just fetch Thelma, then light the lamp. Thelma will tell you when 'tis time to get Doctor Neale."

Dougal was already on his way out, carrying his other boot. She heard him yelling for Thelma as he raced along the verandah. Tiger had insisted the doctor be fetched, although it wasn't common practice to have more than a midwife in attendance. Isabella hated the local woman who helped at the births and wasn't about to argue with his decision.

"Is everything all right?" Tiger asked warily. Isabella looked up as he came in and bent to set a candle on the chest beside the bed. She swallowed when he stood at her side, his scent all around her. He'd pulled on his trousers, but nothing else. The golden strands of his hair were tangled and sleep messed.

"Course 'tis." Isabella pulled a face. "You'd best get out of here

afore Thelma starts to bustle about. Dougal will ride for the doctor, but she'll tell him when."

Another pain cramped through her, and she hunched over, her arms about her middle. In a trice Tiger was on his knees in front of her.

"Is it bad?" he asked, his brows furrowed. He had a hand on each of her knees, then as if it suddenly occurred to him where they were he removed them, with an awkwardness totally out of character.

"I've felt better," Isabella mumbled.

"What can I do?" His earnest inquiry stunned her.

Isabella stared at him. "You actually spoke to me? Did my ears hear right? Did Tiger Carstairs really ask me, the whore who's about to give birth to his child, if he could do anything to help her?"

"Don't start that again!" He stood over her, making her feel tiny and vulnerable.

"Do you know what today is?" she asked, looking up at him sideways.

"September the eighteenth. What's that got to do with anything?" He frowned.

"Everything, as a matter of fact. I told you all along this child was yours, Tiger." She pointed a finger at him. "This proves it."

"It proves nothing. The baby's most likely early."

She shook her head in disbelief. "Have you looked at the size of me lately? Unless I have three babies inside me I couldn't be much bigger. You're a stubborn devil, Tiger Carstairs. Get out. I don't need you, and I don't want you. Dougal's my husband. He'll take care of me."

For a moment he stood as if undecided. Then, with one more odd glance, he left. Isabella let out a long sigh, rocking backwards and forwards, her arms folded across her breasts.

Thelma rushed in, Dougal right behind her. "Tiger's going for Doc Neale. He offered to go so's Dougal could be with you. How's it going, Bella?"

"Not so bad. I think I'll walk about. Have we got everything ready?" She pushed herself up, a hand on her lower back.

"Don't worry about a thing, lovey. We have it all set up, just like the doctor told us." Thelma put an arm about Isabella's waist and the two of them paced the kitchen.

Tiger pounded on the door of Doctor Neale's house. It was unusual, he knew, for the doctor to be summoned for women in childbirth, but Thelma had told him how Bella had mistrusted the midwife. Let people talk, he wasn't about to put a woman who was in his care in danger. Doctor Neale was a close friend of his, as well as his physician. The man had asked no questions when Tiger had first broached the subject of his attending at the birth.

"All right, all right. What is it?" The doctor opened the door and squinted out, a candle held high.

"'Tis Bella, Neale. She's started. Thelma said for you to come straight away." Tiger stepped into the kitchen.

"How long since her pains began?" Neale walked back into his bedroom as he fired the question, pulling his trousers on as he came out.

"Just a while before I left. I think. Dougal was after coming, but I told him to stay with her." Tiger went from foot to foot jerkily, then stopped moving about when he saw his friend's smile. Neale patted his arm.

"Just where a husband should be. With his wife when she produces his first child. How's the boy standing up? I've yet to see a first time father who hasn't got himself in a fever of anxiety." He chuckled as he pushed his shirttail into the waistband of his trousers. He gave Tiger a mischievous grin. "You look slightly anxious yourself, my good man. Anybody would think you had a hand in the proceedings."

Picking up his leather bag he ushered Tiger out, then closed the door, so missing the look Tiger shot at him. The good doctor was far too perceptive for his own good.

"I'll saddle my mare. Be with you in a minute."

Soon they were cantering towards the farm. There was little time for talking, but as they dismounted Tiger caught Neale by the arm. "Just one thing, Doc. Could this baby be early? Would you say there's a good chance that it's coming too soon?"

"Too soon? Ah, I see." Neale nodded twice. "You mean because the pair of them didn't wed 'til March. Well, there are not many that wait 'til after the priest has joined them before God, if that's your meaning. No, the lass is far too big for it to be a premature birth. I'd say the child was conceived just before Christmas. I'll know for sure once it's born." He grinned as he patted Tiger's arm. "No need to worry. This child will be fit and strong, like his father. Isabella's a fine woman. I doubt she will have a moment's trouble delivering a bonny baby."

"Aye, she's a fine woman." Tiger took the reins from his hands and

turned his back on him. "You'd best be getting in," he muttered before he led the horses around to the stables.

Inside, alone, he threw back his head and let out a groan. God! 'Twas not possible!

After he'd unsaddled both mounts and watered and stabled them he sat on an upturned bucket and buried his face in his hands. Neale could be wrong. That was it, he'd made a miscalculation this time. Soon the truth would be out. The child would be a scrawny bundle, born before its time.

"Come lass, look at your bonny boy. 'Tis the finest babe I've delivered in a long time." Doctor Neale put the swaddled baby on Isabella's breast, urging one of her hands to its head.

Isabella opened her eyes wearily and squinted down at the bundle. Her baby; Tiger's child. "Is he ...? Is he healthy?"

"As healthy a babe as you'll ever see. And not a moment's worry over his birth. You'll give birth to many fine children, madam," he assured her, touching the downy head of the baby and smiling. "In a while we'll put him to your breast."

Isabella shook her head.

"What, you don't wish to feed your baby?" he asked, shocked.

"No. Of course I intend to feed him. I mean I will not give birth to any more. This will be my only one, Doctor Neale."

For a moment he just looked at her, then he asked softly, "You dislike children?"

"No, I just dislike the idea of having them." She gave her son a kiss on his forehead.

"She's just feeling a bit down after the birth," Thelma said, coming back into the room in time to hear the last part of the conversation. "Lord, I'll take whatever ones she don't want."

Isabella felt a moment of remorse for her hasty words. Thelma yearned for babies, but had never been able to get herself with child, let alone carry one for nine months.

Dougal came in then and sat on the side of the bed. "Would you like to hold your son?" the doctor asked, patting him on the back.

"He's not ..." Dougal jumped up, pacing over to the narrow window.

"No, I'll have plenty of time to hold him later."

"He won't break, you know. Surely you wish to cradle your son in your arms. All new fathers do." The doctor chuckled as he finished washing his hands and began to dry them.

"I don't wish to. Does that make me strange!" Dougal's voice had risen. "I thought I could accept it, but I can't." He glared at the three of them and rushed from the room, his boots thudding fiercely on the boards.

Isabella and Thelma exchanged a glance. The doctor shrugged. "It takes some men a while to get used to it," he muttered. "Ah, Tiger, come in and take a look at the new member of your household."

Tiger hesitated by the door. "'Tis a boy, then?"

"Aye, a fine lad. I've delivered a few bigger and healthier, but not many. 'Tis strange that he hasn't his father or mother's colouring. But often babes are born so fair yet turn dark after. No doubt he's your child, Bella, but I can't see much of Dougal in him. No doubt that's why the lad has no wish to have much to do with him yet. He feels let down."

"How about a cup of tea, doctor?" Thelma asked, picking discarded towels up from the floor and walking to where Tiger still hovered by the door. "Or perhaps something stronger, eh?"

"Tea sounds just what the doctor ordered, my good woman. Don't stay long, Tiger, the baby has to be fed." He patted Tiger's broad shoulder as he went out, still smiling.

"So, I was wrong." Tiger moved to the bed, staring at the baby as if mesmerised.

"More wrong than you'll ever know." Bitterly Isabella looked away from him, pressing the babe closer to her breast and kissing the head covered with fine, almost white hair.

"I'll admit I was mistaken about the babe. But still I have no way of knowing how many men you lay with while whoring with Selena."

Isabella shook her head tiredly. No sense in arguing any more. He'd never see the truth. Some men didn't wish to see what was right beneath their noses. "He looks like you. Would you like to hold him?"

Tiger took a pace back, his eyes wide, but as if drawn to the infant by some invisible cord he moved close again and touched the tiny fist that protruded from the shawl.

"Go on, take him," she insisted. "It may be the only chance you'll ever get. He's mine, Tiger, and no one on this earth will ever come between us."

"Perhaps no one will ever want to."

"I've found that you never can be sure about what folk are likely to do. People change so suddenly that before you blink an eye their feelings have altered." Bitterness made her voice brittle.

Tiger sighed heavily. Isabella held up their son and he tentatively took him into his arms. With a tenderness Isabella had never seen on him before he looked down on the small pink round face. Touching the soft fluff on the baby's head with his lips, he whispered, "He's very strong," as one of his long fingers was trapped inside a small fist.

"Aye, like his father. Let's only hope he isn't as stubborn." Isabella swallowed as she watched the changing expressions on Tiger's face. His features, always implacable, had softened until for the first time ever he looked vulnerable. She wondered what he would say if she told him that too much of the side he preferred to keep controlled and hidden away was showing.

"What are you going to call him?" Tiger must have realised his feelings were showing for abruptly he masked his emotions, and his face became blank as he handed the baby back to her, carefully ensuring their fingers didn't meet. But as he went to withdraw his hand it accidentally brushed one of her breasts. She flinched.

"I'm sorry," he blurted, dark streaks staining his cheekbones.

"It's all right." Isabella covered her own blush by bending over the baby. "I'm just full," she mumbled. "The baby should be fed."

At that moment the doctor came back. "Just what I was about to suggest. Off you go, Tiger." He gave Tiger a push in the back. "And what are you going to call this fine lad?" he queried.

"Timothy."

Isabella gave Tiger a defiant glare when he stopped in his tracks and faced her, his eyes wide.

"A fine name," the doctor declared.

"Aye," she agreed, outstaring Tiger. "'Twas the name of a man I once cared for who is gone from me forever."

Without another word Tiger turned on his heel and left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MAY 1821

"I'll put Tim to bed, shall I?" Thelma asked, pushing herself up from the seat beneath the verandah.

They watched Tim as he chased one of the dogs, chuckling when the animal dodged away and took off in another direction.

Isabella looked down at the baby in her arms. Dougie gripped a fistful of bodice in his strong little fingers. At seven months he was already wilful. She smiled up at Thelma.

"Thank you. If you can catch him, that is. The little so-and-so gets faster every day. I'll just finish feeding Dougie and follow you in. Come here, Tim, time you was in bed," she called. "Leave the poor dog be, you'll make it sick and yourself along with it."

Isabella sighed. Her fair-haired son was a miniature of his father, even down to the same arrogant stance when Thelma tried to take his hand.

At twenty months Tim was full of life and forever into new tricks to pull on Thelma, who had slowed down so much in the past year that Isabella was often filled with fear for her friend.

Tim finally allowed himself to be caught, just as Tiger strolled from the back of the house to join them. Holding Thelma's hand Tim stood before the man who was his hero.

"Don't wanna go to bed yet, Tiger," Tim stated, grinning mischievously, his blonde eyebrows going up, much as Tiger's did when he was issuing an ultimatum.

"You'll do as your mother says." Tiger reached to pick him up, growling in his ear as he turned him upside down until Tim was squealing in delight.

"Put him down, he'll never get to sleep if you excite him so," Dougal ordered, scowling.

Tiger stood still for a moment, and Isabella wondered how long it would be before he defied Dougal where the child was concerned. Slowly he lowered his son to the ground, then with a silent nod patted Tim on the head. The look he sent Dougal was filled with contempt. "Off to bed, Tim," he said. "Do as you're told." With a shrug he headed for

the stable.

Thelma sighed heavily and glanced at Dougal before saying, "Come, Tim, let's go." She took his tiny hand. "We'll get some of that dust washed off you afore you go to your bed, eh?"

"Why?" Isabella heard him ask. She smiled. He was always so curious. He'd even wondered only recently why his own hair was so light in colour, yet his baby brother's so dark.

While Timothy resembled Tiger to the last eyelash, so Dougie was the image of Dougal, his hair as black as a raven's wing.

Running her fingers over Dougie's dark head Isabella spared a rare moment's thought for how things would have worked out if Tiger had been willing to accept that the child she had carried was his. Not for anything would she give up Dougie, but everyone had admitted he was a difficult and troublesome baby.

"I'm taking him in now," she said, rising with the sleeping baby cradled against her breast. Ginger said a quiet goodnight, but Dougal said not a word. As she walked to the room Tiger had added to the rear of the house after Tim's birth she heard them talking in lowered tones about the sheep. Always they discussed those blessed sheep.

She hadn't allowed Dougal to touch her since before Dougie's birth, and he grew more sullen as the days passed. When she'd told him she didn't wish to be saddled with a baby every year the ensuing quarrel had widened the breach between them.

"'Tis nothing to do with having a baby. You just don't want me near you," he'd tossed at her. She hadn't argued with him. How could she, when it was the truth. The thought of his hands on her body filled her with revulsion. Often now Dougal stayed away watching the sheep for days and nights on end. Although she knew it was wrong of her she was happy when he was away. They barely passed a civil word when he was home, and what little respect she'd held for him had long since gone.

Tiger's property had expanded and she suspected he was becoming very rich. Often she wondered why he never married one of the free settlers' daughters who twittered after him. It had been common knowledge that he had courted Prudence Bacon for a few months, and Isabella had fully expected an announcement of their wedding. But nothing had come of it. The girl had since become betrothed to a lieutenant in the King's Regiment. Why that should have made her feel exultant she wasn't willing to admit to herself.

When she'd asked him about it on one of the rare occasions when they'd spoken to each other he'd given her a strange look, before informing her coldly, "When and who I decide to marry is of no concern of yours, madam."

"True," she'd replied nonchalantly. "'Tis just that you are dragging your feet somewhat. Don't you want to start a family before you reach your dotage? Don't you desire children to carry on your name after you've gone? A son perhaps to inherit your farm." A demon inside her drove her to taunt him.

"I have a son," he'd told her abruptly.

"Oh, whose?" She'd shrugged carelessly, cherishing a moment of delight when his eyes had narrowed to menacing slits. "One of your mistresses'?"

"I have Tim," he'd answered through his teeth.

With a cynical laugh she had retorted, "Tim is mine. He has no father. I shall tell him that when he's old enough to know the truth. I shall tell him his father is dead. He may as well be. His father disowned him."

She had really thought Tiger was about to hit her, his face was so twisted with rage. But he hadn't, and she'd faced him with her chin held high.

"Oh no, I'll not lay a hand on you in anger, and you know it. But often I feel I could kill you, Bella," he'd whispered, turning on his heel and striding off, his hands clenched into fists.

"And I you!" she'd shouted at his receding back.

"Do you think Tiger will head over the mountains, Thelma?" she asked as she put the baby into the crib at the foot of her bed and tucked his covers around him. "I know he's talked about it often enough, but is it just a dream with him, d'you think?"

"Over the hills," Tim chanted.

Isabella bent over him, smiling as she secured his arms beneath his bedcovers. He promptly set them free again, reaching up to grip her about the neck.

"Tiger fills his head with stories of life over the other side of those blessed mountains," Thelma said, folding Tim's clothes. "Aye, no doubt about it, Bella, he'll head off. He's been itching to go for years."

"Often I think they are all mad to put up with the dry hot days and the floods and the lack of grazing pastures in this harsh land. We were sent here, like it or not, but so many come of their own accord now. And

with so many new settlers coming in it's getting mighty crowded."

"Aye. Governor Macquarie has certainly built Sydney into a fine town, but without the farmers producing the grain and animals, the townsfolk won't get far. I suppose Tiger's right in what he says, there's pasture aplenty over yon mountains, so why not give land grants to any who are willing to go off to places unknown and start afresh. Those who've been given tracts over there seem to be doing all right."

"Aye, but if Tiger goes then we'll all be forced to tag along with him, Thelma. And I don't know as I'm so keen to be going off into the wilds where there's natives and bushrangers hiding behind every tree."

"Ah, half of what you hear is a load of rubbish spouted by those who have little ambition, and aren't willing to try something new," Thelma argued. "There's been little trouble from the natives since they attacked the Macarthur's farm at Cowpastures five years or so ago."

"I suppose you're right. The colony must expand, and Tiger is bound to be up the front leading the charge inland once the grants are given. Now, Tim, go to sleep." Isabella tapped him on the end of his nose, then bent to kiss him. "Sleep tight, son."

"We're going over the mountains, Tiger says so," he told her as she went to the door with Thelma, after making sure Dougie was asleep.

"If Tiger says so, then it must be true." Isabella sighed as she blew him a kiss.

Thelma went straight back to the kitchen, but Isabella lingered beneath the verandah, staring out over the paddocks, watching a flock of pink and grey parrots squabble over perches in a gum tree. This was her favourite time of the year, when the days were warm and the nights cool. She doubted she would ever become accustomed to the long stifling days of summer heat where often the winds seemed to draw every last piece of moisture from your skin.

Tiger came from the stables so quietly she didn't hear him until he was standing a few paces away. Turning her head she faced him and for long moments they stood silently regarding each other, the air about them throbbing with unspoken words. Then he came near until he was an arm's length away. As if he could do nothing to stop himself he lifted a hand and stroked two fingers down her cheek.

"Oh." She grasped his wrist. A jolt of awareness thrilled along her skin, and she longed to take the step forward that would bring her into contact with his powerful body. Instead she forced herself to sneer as she said, "Take your hands off me!"

"No!" He bit the word out. "I have no wish to. I wish to touch you. I want to kiss you. Undress you and make love to you. God help me, but I want you so much I'm dying of it!"

"Then die!" With a sudden jerk she managed to push his hand away, but he was too strong and too quick for her. In a flash he had both his arms about her and was pulling her against his hard body.

"I may just do that," he whispered hoarsely, his mouth hovering above hers.

"Kiss me and I'll –"

"What? Bite me as you did once before? Do it and you'll pay the consequences, Bella my love."

"It would be worth being punished, just for the satisfaction of hurting you."

"Oh, don't fear, I'm already hurting, Bella." His tone had softened and the sultry throb in his voice sent small thrills along her spine.

"Don't be daft! Only people with hearts can get hurt. You have a chunk of stone where your heart should be." She struggled, knowing it was useless, and knowing deep down she had no real desire to fight him. "Let me go, please," she pleaded. "I don't know what you think you can do by forcing me to stay in your arms this way."

"Don't you? I think you lie. We both know what I could do given the fancy, Bella. And it's no use lying to me and saying I don't make you shake with wanting me, because I can feel every tremor that's going through you right now." To prove it he ran his hands up and down her arms, then pressed a finger to the pulse point in her throat where her blood was pumping erratically through her veins.

"That's fear. You frighten me." She shook her head.

He had the gall to laugh, his throat arching as he threw his head back, showing her his strong arched neck. "I've never scared you, little Bella. You're stronger than me in your way. No, we both know it's desire that's making you shake as much as me at this moment. Feel me." He grabbed her hand and despite her struggles to release it pressed it on his chest so she could feel the heavy thump of his heart vibrating under her palm.

"Why are you doing this? You're not right in the head. I can't work out what you want. Now let me go."

"Why won't you let Dougal into your bed? Have you been ill since the baby was born?" She gave a small shake of the head, and he grinned devilishly. "Not sick, eh? The poor sod spends too much time with his

sheep lately. He's getting as dopey as them."

"You have a cruel streak in you that I find hateful, Tiger Carstairs. Now, let me go, and go off to your new mistress." Her lip curled as she glared up into his gold-flecked eyes.

"Mistress?" He let out a soft laugh, staring intently at her. "You've been listening to false gossip again, my love."

"Your love! You make me mad with rage when you talk so. You're the one who is false. Go away Tiger, and leave me be, for heaven's sake!"

"I'm never going away, don't you see? I'll always be here, and you'll always be mine, no matter what. Every part of you is mine; your beautiful hair, your silken limbs, your slim and graceful body." With a soft grunt he pulled her up against him until she could feel every part of his body from his knee to his chest. "See what you do to me. Feel my wanting." He groaned as he rotated her hips against his.

Isabella stifled a sob of anguish. She thumped at his chest in frustration. "I'll be free of you one day, Tiger. Soon I'll be getting my ticket of leave, then Dougal will get his own land from the Governor. You'll have no hold over me then."

"You think so?" He grunted when she struck him again. "We'll always have a hold over each other, you and me, Bella. Something binds us together and no matter how much you deny it we'll always have this between us. I've had the sense to admit it, why don't you?"

His head bent swiftly, his mouth covering hers with a savagery that would have frightened her if it hadn't excited her so much.

Isabella moaned as he deepened the kiss, possessing her, binding them as surely as he'd stated. His hands held her fast while he feasted on her mouth.

She knew every word he said was true, but she would not yield to him. Could not willingly give what he'd tossed aside with careless abandon. Could not forget he'd treated her like the whore he'd accused her of being.

Bringing up one of the hands that was trapped between their bodies she struck him across the head. He reeled back in shock, his breathing uneven.

"I hate you! I mean it, Tiger, leave me be. I'll carry a knife in future and if you set a finger on me I'll kill you." Wiping her swollen lips she stepped back. He let her go.

"No need. I just wanted to see if you still tasted as sweet. You

wouldn't kill me and we both know it. You've had plenty of opportunity to get rid of me and would have done it long afore now if you'd really had a mind to." She flinched as he ran a finger across her lower lip. "And another thing, Tim's my son, and nobody can dispute it. Try to tell him I'm dead and I'll tell him the truth."

She sneered. "Strange that a man who didn't want to admit he had a son suddenly finds he covets the boy. You can't change your mind, Tiger. You didn't want him ... or me."

"A man can change his mind."

He pushed his hair back and she noted with satisfaction that his fingers were shaking. "I suppose a man like you can do just what he pleases." Her eyes narrowed with scorn.

"That's it, Bella. Glad you're finally learning. Oh, by the by, the Honourable Cecil Houghton sailed back to Merrie England, I thought you'd be pleased to hear."

Isabella stared at him. "He did? Last I heard he was setting up in business, drawing together a group of like- minded Exclusives."

"He was, but he had no head for it, so I heard. Anyways, he loved gambling too much, and had not the wit for that either. Blessed if he didn't lose all his wealth at the gaming tables. Far be it from me to boast, but a fair portion of it has ended up in my bank account. So, you are free of that scoundrel at least." He touched a finger to her chin and Isabella shrank back.

"If only I were as free of you!"

"Ah, Bella, love, the only way we will be free of each other is when one or the other is dead, don't you see?" Turning on his heel he walked off, whistling.

"Go to the devil! You belong with him," she shouted after him, not caring who heard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

1822

Tiger dropped Satan's reins and rubbed his palms together. As he stroked the stallion's sleek neck he stared at the grazing flock, whose bleating filled the morning air.

"I was sorry to see Governor Macquarie go, Ginger, but I have to own to being more than satisfied with the new Governor's ideas. With his land reforms we'll be on our way over the mountains soon, you mark my words." He looked into the hazy distance, where the mountains with their constant lure beckoned him irresistibly.

"Aye, he's got things moving along nicely, Tiger, I'll say that for him. Some of the squatters are a bone idle lot, setting themselves anywhere they wanted and then letting their boundaries get all mixed together. And they've just let too many sheep on their land without thought of it being over grazed. 'Tis getting worse than after the great caterpillar plague."

"Well, Ginger, Governor Brisbane's new tickets of occupation are just what we needed. Now we can apply for land before it's surveyed, then once we get over the mountains we can legally claim it and a grant will be issued. At least we now have a sure idea of when we can start to think about moving. I'll put the farm up for sale straight away. With all the free folk coming over from England these days I doubt I'll have trouble selling it."

"'Twill be good to head to new pastures, but I admit I'll be sad to leave the old place." Ginger turned in the saddle, a hand up to shield his eyes as he watched one of his dogs herding a stray lamb back towards the flock.

"Aye." Tiger took the band of cloth from his neck and wiped his brow. "But think on it, Ginger. Land as far as the eye can see, all lush and green. None of this over- grazed scrub. We'll be far better off."

"Aye, but I've my doubts about the new Governor's idea – why should each landowner be forced to take on convicts?"

"And at our own expense." Tiger chuckled. "One convict for every hundred acres of land. No, Ginger, I find it a good idea. All the fools who are too lazy or not ambitious enough to seek greener pastures will be

stuck with more convicts than they can afford to keep."

Ginger nodded. "Aye, true. But I have a feeling the women aren't too pleased at the idea of upping and moving, though, Tiger."

"I dare say our Bella will give me a piece of her mind as usual, but Thelma's all for going. She knows she'll have a house of her own over there."

"Aye, Thelma's dreamed of that for a long time."

Tiger threaded his fingers through Satan's mane and the stallion tossed his head. Isabella barely spoke to him any more. Often he had an urge to drag her off somewhere so they could be alone. He ought to kiss her senseless, until neither of them would be able to draw enough breath to speak.

But she was Dougal's wife, not his to do with as he liked. God, but there were times when he was so filled with regrets that thinking about it threatened his sanity.

"Best get started on stripping these beasts of their fleece, if we're a'gonna be taking them over them mountains soon, then," Ginger said, and Tiger brought himself back to the business at hand. Lord, there were times of late when he caught himself drifting off like a lovesick young fool panting after his first sweetheart.

"Aye, and the cows will have to be visited by the bull, so they carry calves with them. I'll be going into town tomorrow. I'll put the farm in the land agent's hands."

"Will we ever come back, Mama?" Tim asked. "It's a long way over the mountains, Tiger told me. He said it will take this many days to get there." He held both his tiny hands aloft, fingers spread.

"Aye, 'tis a long way for sure, but we'll be back, have no fear, Tim. You and Dougie are going to attend the fine school of Doctor Halloran, I've made up my mind." Isabella smoothed his fine hair back from his brow, then ran a finger over his small frown. "His establishment is for the education of young gentlemen."

"But we're not gentlemen, Mama," Tim scoffed.

"Ha. You two are going to be the finest gents in the colony. I've made up my mind." She smiled as she hugged Dougie to her breast. Dougal didn't know it yet, nor did Tiger Carstairs, but her sons would rise higher in life than being sheep farmers. "You might even be a

doctor, like Doc Neale. Would you like that Tim?"

"No, Mama." He shook his head. "I'm going to be a great land owner, just like Tiger."

Isabella hid a grimace. Tiger was his idol, someone to be followed and copied in all things, good or bad.

"Will we be attacked by wild dogs or kangaroos on the way over, Mama, do you think?"

"Of course not! Not while we have Tiger to protect us," Isabella assured him, knowing her scorn was lost on the child.

Tim grinned and ran off, content in the knowledge that his precious Tiger would take care of him, no matter what ill befell them. Isabella often thought how strange it was that he never presumed Dougal would be their protector. Although she'd never once shown the children by act or speech how she despised Dougal, Tim somehow sensed that the man he called father played only a small insignificant part in their lives. It was Tiger he turned to for guidance, information and encouragement.

What Tiger thought of this state of affairs she had no idea. But she knew Dougal's resentment had festered until he had become a man filled with hate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SEPTEMBER 1823

So much had happened in this house, good and bad. Isabella felt a melancholy tug deep inside as she gave it one long last look. She had to think of the future now. Nothing was ever gained by looking back. Lord, she had plenty of regrets, but what was the point in dwelling on them.

She had gained her ticket of leave. It was safely packed in her trunk. Dougal had a small grant of land alongside Tiger's over near Bathurst, so once over the other side they could set out on their own at last. The prospect brought no excitement along with it. Strangely, her ticket, which she had earned before her sentence had run its full course, had brought little cause for celebration either. After all, she'd hardly lived the life of a convict.

Thelma coughed, a ragged sound that seemed to tear at her throat. Isabella glanced over at her dear friend. If not for her she would probably have argued for Dougal to take land down Emu Plains or somewhere nearer the town, anywhere he could run a few sheep and cattle and they could plant some crops, make a future for the boys and to hell with Tiger Carstairs.

That man came riding up on Satan. "All set?" he asked, tipping his wide brimmed hat over his forehead.

Isabella nodded without meeting his glowing eyes. His excitement was enough to encompass everybody. She could almost reach out and touch it.

"Move along then, Johnny," he called, wheeling his horse to signal to the man sitting alongside Isabella.

Johnny was one of the four convicts among the eight men going with them as well as Dougal and Ginger. He was a bit slow with his thoughts, but strong and reliable. A Dorset-bred man of about fifty, he had been transported for poaching.

"Hold tight, Missus." He gave Isabella an amiable smile as he slapped the reins to coax the lead horse along.

The party consisted of the wagon, pulled by the gelding that had taken Isabella and Dougal home for the first time, two drays each pulled by five bullocks, and two covered wagons each with four horses in

harness. Isabella rode up front on one of these covered wagons, and Thelma was on the other. Tiger now owned seventeen horses in all. Dougal, Ginger and three of the men were riding saddle horses while the spare two were hitched behind drays.

The two men in charge of the bullocks were distinctly different from the other men, treating their oxen with more gentleness than the humans. Thelma and Isabella exchanged a grimace when they heard their language. It would have no place in polite society. But Tiger had insisted they were masters at handling the bullocks, a necessity where they were heading.

"The oxen are preferred to horses over long trails," Tiger had told them. "They pull a dray steadily, rather than jerk it as the horses tend to do."

Thelma waved from her seat and Isabella waved back. "Sit still, Tim," she commanded. He was bouncing on the benchseat in his excitement. "Hold him tight, Agnes, I don't want him falling off before we get out of the gate!"

"He's all right, Missus," Agnes reassured her. Isabella wasn't so confident and had second thoughts about letting him ride with the girl. Agnes was fourteen. She'd been in the colony for ten years. Her mother had died on the ship over and Agnes had spent most of her life in the orphanage Elizabeth Paterson and Anna King in had started in 1800. Isabella dreaded to think what would have happened to the girl if these two wonderful women hadn't seen a need to create the institution for the wretched, abandoned and neglected orphans of the colony, of which there were many.

Agnes was gentle and so thrilled to be going on the journey west with them that she could be forgiven for being forgetful at times. Isabella wasn't as pleased with the other female they'd been assigned. Lily was twenty but looked and acted much older than her years. Buxom was the only description for her. She was seated beside Thelma and already flirting with the driver. Isabella had no illusions about Lily; she would lie with any man who so much as winked at her. The man she craved, Tiger, ignored her blatant efforts to entice him. This fact annoyed and dismayed her. It was obvious that usually few men turned away her free favours.

Isabella wished devoutly they could have got a woman with more sense and less conceit. But they needed another woman's help. Thelma had grown so thin and was sick so often these days that they were

forced to take Lily. She seemed to be a willing worker; if only she would keep her hands off the men. She'd been in the criminal class at the factory for being drunk and disorderly and Isabella had no idea why Tiger had selected her.

Dougal, Ginger, their five dogs, and three of the men had left yesterday with the flock of sheep, the cattle, goats and pigs. They planned to meet them at the Nepean River.

It had taken weeks of packing, a task Tiger had overseen with impatience and exactitude. Even now Isabella couldn't believe how demanding he'd been. But no one could deny he had planned everything down to the last detail.

Cherry and plum stones, walnut, chestnut and hazelnuts had been packed in papers, then put in well-corked bottles. They carried potatoes, hop and clover seed, vine cuttings. Tea, sugar, glass, crockery, flour, grain; meat, salted or smoked. Fruit and vegetables to eat on the journey as well as seedlings. Beer and spirits. Linens, wool, agricultural and carpenter tools. Their clothing and some of the furniture from the house, along with many more provisions to last for the next six months when they would be isolated miles from anywhere. The fledgling township of Bathurst consisted of no more than a barracks, granary, cottages for the medical officer and magistrate, and a gaol hospital with an officer in charge.

Isabella turned to lift a hand as the wagons trundled away from the house. The new owners stood with their arms about each other. They were free settlers, a young couple fresh from England who'd been more than eager to buy the place from Tiger.

"Sit still now, Dougie, and stop shouting. Tim can see you from here. He's only on the next wagon, not miles away," Isabella admonished. At three Dougie idolised his brother. The pair of them were inseparable. If Tim was out of sight for more than a few moments Dougie put on a tantrum. "Keep an eye on the pups. Their mama will want to know they are being looked after."

Dougie did as he was told and began to speak to the litter of five that slept in a box behind the seat, alongside a cage holding some of the fowl. The bitch trotted alongside the wagon, her tongue lolling, her soft eyes darting upwards every now and then to where she knew her brood were.

It was hot for September, a haze over the mountains in the distance making them seem alien.

"The boss reckons we should reach Rooty Hill by nightfall, Missus," Johnny commented, then shouted to one of the bullock drivers who urged his charges on with a long whip.

"Aye." She nodded. What Tiger said usually came to be. He'd said it would take them about two to three weeks to cover the hundred and twenty miles to Bathurst. Not that he'd told her personally. The news had been passed on through Thelma. Isabella and Tiger barely exchanged a word these days unless it was crucial. Isabella often felt as if Thelma and her children were the only souls who thought she was worth anything. Even Ginger, who'd never had much to say, rarely spoke to her any more. Of course he blamed her for Dougal's taciturn and surly temper. Perhaps he was right. To be refused a husband's rights for so long would try the patience of any man, she supposed. Odd as it seemed he had never tried to force himself on her again, and she wasn't about to make the first move to bridge the gap between them. Perhaps he despised her so much he had no desire to touch her. Who could blame him?

Tiger rode back when they'd been travelling for about an hour. Isabella was in the leading wagon. He gave her a small, barely definable, nod. "'Tis fair going for a while, Johnny," he said, turning in his saddle to wave when Tim called out to him. "Hello, Tim, mind you watch the road for wild animals, eh?"

"I'm watching, Tiger," Tim yelled back, scanning the side of the road eagerly. "Did you see the mob of kangaroos? How many was there, eh? About a thousand?"

"More like a hundred, I'd say, Tim."

Tiger stared at Isabella for a while. The woman grew lovelier with each passing day. Gone was the innocent air she'd worn in the early days. A kind of ethereal beauty that sometimes struck him like a kick in the gut had replaced it. She didn't let Dougal into her bed; hadn't in the three years since Dougie's birth. The man must be mad. If she were his woman he'd bend her to his will in no time.

No he wouldn't, and he knew it. He fooled himself into thinking that she still bore a small touch of the lust he felt for her. But it was as if she was untouchable. She'd shut herself off behind a wall of her own making. Heaven knew that Dougal was going half insane with wanting her; his own feelings Tiger managed to keep under strict control. If she so much as got a scent of exactly how he felt she would twist him around her little finger. No woman was going to make a fool of him.

"Is the boy tiring?" he asked Isabella, suddenly feeling a need to force her to converse with him.

"Ask him yourself. He's a tongue in his head," she said.

Tiger shook his head and returned her glare. Shrugging his shoulders, he rode off. Damn the woman!

They made camp at nightfall, at Rooty Hill. "The boss was right, eh, missus?" Johnny said with a grin.

"Aye, he usually is," Isabella replied wryly.

The boys ran about, whooping and shouting as the tents were erected. "'Tis not every boy who manages to start out on a great adventure on his birthday," Thelma said to Tim when they paused for breath.

"Aye, and if he doesn't quieten down, he'll be a boy who's sick on his birthday," Isabella retorted, grabbing hold of Tim as he ran past her. "Come and eat these special cakes that Thelma made for you."

"You can't blame them for wanting to stretch their legs, Bella. 'Tis a long while for them to sit on the wagon." Thelma stretched and put a hand to her spine with a groan as she sat on the ground near the fire.

"Mmm, lovely cakes." Tim sat crosslegged on the grass and took one. Dougie sat beside him, copying Tim's movements, and the two of them put their heads together, giggling.

"Just look at that harlot. Jesus, I wish Tiger hadn't brought her." Thelma turned her nose up as they watched Lily flaunting her large breasts to the men, who were sitting in a circle around their separate fire, eating their ration of food.

"She's helped with the cooking and pitching of tents, Thelma, so I s'pose she's done her share of the work. At least she'll keep the men happy, and they might keep their hands off Agnes and their eyes off me. I didn't fancy the way a couple of them were eyeing me earlier."

"Tiger'll keep them out of your way, Bella." Thelma yawned.

"You think so. He probably thinks me no better than Lily." Isabella sighed, stroking Dougie's dark head as the child munched on his wheatcake.

"No, Bella. He gave up thinking of you as that kind long ago."

Isabella gave her a sceptical look. "He has a funny way of showing it then. He still treats me no better than a convict slave."

"Ah, Bella, that's not true and you know it." Thelma made a small sound of disgust. "You're both as stubborn as each other. The pair of you have too much pride to admit you were wrong."

"Maybe so. Tim, put the pup down while you're eating," Isabella scolded.

Tim laughed, but did as he was told. The pup waddled over to join its mother and littermates.

"I hope Ginger and Dougal are managing all right. Those men they have with them are all supposed to have some experience as shepherds or herdsmen, but they looked a sorry bunch." Thelma pulled a face as she began to cough raggedly.

"Where's your medicine?" Isabella got up to go to the bag that held Thelma's personal possessions. Doctor Neale had given her a good supply of the herbal concoction that eased the racking cough. Isabella hoped sincerely that it would last until Tiger made a return trip to town, once they were camped on the new land.

"Thanks, dear." Thelma smiled, taking the bottle. She took a sip of the dark liquid, then licked her lips. "'Tis the damp air that brings on the cough. Once we get onto the plains I'll be fine."

Isabella said nothing. She doubted Thelma would improve anywhere. If Doctor Neale had been able to stop the coughing before now he would have done so, she was sure.

"Come on, boys, let's get you into bed." Isabella picked Dougie up and for once he put up no argument.

Tiger walked over to their fire and ruffled Tim's hair as the boy gravely offered a hand to be shaken. "Goodnight, lads," he said. "No tricks now, go straight to sleep this night. We have a long trek ahead of us tomorrow."

"All right, Tiger," Tim agreed, yawning. "You will let me know if you see an opossum in the trees though, won't you?"

"Aye, that's a promise. If one comes down to see what we're a doing in his part of the woods I'll be sure to give you a call." Tiger grinned.

Isabella turned her back on Tiger as he sat on a log near their fire, stretching his long legs before him. He began to talk softly to Thelma as Isabella and Agnes prepared the boys for bed.

"I be fair worn out missus, I'll stay here along with the boys," Agnes declared when Tim and Dougie were settled.

"I shan't be long from my bed either," Isabella said as she pulled down the tent flap. She returned to the fire to find Tiger was alone.

"Thelma's gone to her tent," he said, when she hesitated.

"Then I'll be off to bed myself."

Tiger caught her by the wrist as she turned.

"Don't leave on my account. Stay and talk awhile." He tugged gently on her arm.

"Why the sudden urge to talk to me?" She glared at him. "'Tis so long since you spared me the time of day, I'm wondering why you should want my company all of a sudden."

"Oh, Bella!"

He took his hat off and rumbled his hair. It clung damply to his skull, and something quivered deep inside Isabella. Running her tongue over her lips she sat on the log, as far away from him as she could get without falling off the end.

His brows went up and he chuckled. "I have no disease that's catching, you know. 'Tis a sad state of affairs, don't you think when we can't sit and talk like two adults."

"You've not needed my conversation for so long, Tiger Carstairs, I'm thinking maybe you're missing all the females of Sydney Town. How are you going to manage without them, eh? So, you believe Bella will do to pass the time with, is that it? What about Lily, yonder? She's willing to do more than talk with you, so go discuss your day with her."

Abruptly she rose to her feet. But he was too quick for her. In an instant he had pulled her back down, much nearer to him. "Don't make a scene, Bella." He was frowning. "Those cons are thieves and blackguards and the other men aren't much better. As long as they know you are under my protection they'll not lay a finger on you. So don't let them think you want nothing to do with me. I need them to respect me, or I'll have all sorts of trouble on my hands. All right?"

Isabella sighed resignedly and relaxed a bit.

"And Lily is a trollop. I want nothing to do with her. That's one of the main reasons I agreed to let her come along. She can keep that lot happy." He nodded across to the group, who were laughing raucously.

"Oh, it's a wonder you didn't expect me to be the camp whore. After all that's how you think of me," she snapped, then bit her lip as he gave her a dark scrutiny.

"'Tis a long time since we've discussed that matter. Would it help you to know that I long ago decided I was wrong?"

Isabella shook her head ruefully. "It would have saved a lot of bother if you'd been man enough to admit that a long time ago."

Tiger sighed and twisted his hat in his long fingers, thoughtfully studying its brim. "Perhaps. But fate has a strange way of sorting things out."

"Aye, it has that. Tell me, where is the bride you were so intent on getting yourself? The one who was your pass into society? Seems fate didn't sort things out for you. Couldn't you find a prissy miss willing to come along on this trip inland?" Isabella knew, from Thelma, that he had forsaken that idea some time ago. What she didn't know was why.

"That's about it, Bella." He stared at the fire for a moment. "Like I said, 'tis strange how fate works. Prudence was appalled and, I think, terrified by the thought of marrying a rough ex-con like me. And the other misses were keen to flirt and flutter their eyelashes at me in church, but when it came to courting, they fled behind mama's skirts." He let out a long sigh. "Not one of them seemed enamoured of the idea of roughing it beyond the mountains. When I put the proposition to one young maiden she practically fainted clean away. Seems coming to the colony had proved enough of a shock to their fragile systems; the idea of living in a tent or a bark hut didn't appeal."

"What a blow to your ego," she remarked, watching him prod the fire with a long stick. "Fancy not one of them being willing to accompany Tiger Carstairs, the legendary lover of Sydney Town, on his trip into the unknown."

His broad shoulders lifted, and he shook his head. "You came."

"Only because I have no choice. Given the choice I would have preferred Dougal to get a grant nearer town."

He turned his eyes on her and stared at her for so long she shifted beneath his scrutiny. "Are you happy with Dougal?" he suddenly asked.

Isabella gasped. "You are unbelievable, d'you know that! Dougal is probably the unhappiest person alive. I had no right to marry him."

"I didn't ask about Dougal. I asked about you."

She dragged her eyes from his and looked into the fire, letting the flames mesmerise her. "I have my children. That's all a woman can really ask of life, seems to me. At least children love unconditionally."

"Poor Bella," he whispered, a wealth of sadness in his tone.

Isabella shot to her feet. "Don't you poor Bella me!"

For some reason she felt like bursting into tears. "Never feel sorry for me, do you hear?" With a muffled sob she turned and ran.

He called her name softly, but she ignored him. What did he

suddenly have to start going soft on her for? She needed his sympathy less than she needed anything else from him, including his sudden attention.

Tired as she was after the long day's journey she didn't sleep for hours, but lay staring up at the roof of the tent long after the laughter of the men had died, and apart from the occasional whinny of a horse or soft bellow of one of the oxen, the camp was quiet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Ginger rode to meet them as they neared the banks of the Nepean River. Waving his cabbage-tree hat he drew his horse in beside the wagon where Thelma sat. "Ho, how's it?" he shouted, grinning.

"Fine, just fine. Did all go well? I see you have all the stock safely across." Thelma gestured to where Dougal stood on the far bank.

"Aye, 'tis fortunate we took the fleece off the sheep afore we left. We feared we'd lose some. But all are over safely, though it took a while." Ginger saluted Tiger when he rode up. "How was your night, Thelma? Not too cold in the tent?" His smile faded as he gave her a keen look.

"She had a bout of coughing, Ginger, but it eased with the medicine," Isabella assured him. Her reassurance didn't help, for his frown deepened.

Tiger looked to the darkening sky, saying, "Let's get as much as we can across before nightfall. Do you think we'll manage without offloading some of the stuff, Ginger?"

The foreman shook his head. "No. I'd say it'd pay you to take the wagons over as light as possible. We don't want to sink in the mud. 'Tis very soft sand, I doubt it would take a heavy load. Certainly not the drays."

Tiger nodded and turned to the men. "Right, start lifting the top layer off the drays, men, and you can take the wagons across. We'll have no trouble with the smaller loads." He dismounted and came to Isabella. "I suggest the women make camp this side, away from the animals," he said.

Reaching up, he assisted her from the wagon. As soon as her feet hit the ground Isabella disentangled herself from his arms. His golden eyes sparked with displeasure. To hell with the man, why was he suddenly forcing his attentions on her?

The task was slow and laborious. Even though they took half the load off the first dray it sank to its axle in the sand, so they were forced to unload more and tote it back. The next wagon had to return twice.

Tiger fashioned a line on a stick for the boys to dangle in the water

to keep them occupied while the work went on. Dougal sullenly watched them for a while, then returned to the other bank to assist in caring for the stock.

As night fell and the bullocks returned for their final load, one of the teamsters approached Tiger as he rode out of the water, suggesting they unhitch the bullocks to let them forage.

Lily helped in the erecting of the tents then began to cook strips of pork in the long-handled pan over one of the fires. Agnes sat yawning, tired after helping with the chores.

"Tim, Dougie, come here," Isabella called. "It's well past your bedtime. Where's the bitch, Agnes? The boys were playing with her pups."

They'd been over-excited by the prospect of camping by the river. Tiger had promised they could try to catch a fish again in the morning while the rest of the luggage was taken over. Isabella scanned the area within the circle of firelight. They'd been there just a few moments ago. A sinking in her stomach had her jumping to her feet.

"They went off behind yon bush, Missus," Agnes said, rubbing her neck as she stretched her arms above her head. "The boys had one of the pups with them. The bitch was following them."

The bitch appeared out of the undergrowth, the pup in her jaws. She put it in the box with the other pups, who squealed to be fed. Isabella scanned the bushes, her insides clenching when the boys didn't follow the dog. Time seemed suspended and an eerie silence surrounded her. Or was it the ringing in her ears that drowned out all other sounds?

"You were supposed to be watching them!" Panic caught hold of her as she lifted her skirt and headed in the direction the bitch had come from.

"Snake!"

It was Tim. And his shout had Isabella running. Then Tim began to scream, his cries echoing across the water, from tree to tree. Isabella muffled her cry behind a fist as she jumped over an indentation in the ground, swearing as her ankle twisted. Sweat broke out on her forehead.

"Tim! Where are you? For goodness sake, shout again." Fear made her voice shake along with her limbs, so that she nearly fell as she darted through the dense growth.

"Here, Mama. A snake got Dougie."

"Oh my God!" Her vision clouded. She'd never known such terror.

The pain in her ankle was forgotten as she rounded a bush and saw

Dougie on the ground. She threw herself on her knees and shook his small shoulders.

"What happened? Was there really a snake? Tell me, Tim." Frantic now, she ran her hands over Dougie's still body while she prayed Tim was wrong. Perhaps it was a lizard. They had seen many of the reptiles during the day, and with every shred of hope in her she prayed he had confused the creatures.

Tim shook his head. "It was a snake, Mama. It went over there." His small finger pointed behind him. He was shaking violently, and his eyes seemed to fill his grimy face.

Dougie opened his eyes and by the light of the moon Isabella could see his smile. "Dougie," she whispered, heaving a sigh of relief.

But then his eyes drifted shut. "No!" Isabella began to tremble so much that her teeth chattered. Dougie made a strange snuffling noise in the back of his throat. She shook his shoulders, then screamed when he didn't respond. Scrambling to her feet she picked Dougie up and ran for the camp.

Tiger strode towards her. "Bella? Tim!" His eyes darted from her to his son.

"It's Dougie, Tiger. Tim says a snake got him."

"Jesus!" Tiger pulled Tim into his arms.

When they reached the fire she gently placed Dougie's small limp body on the grass a few feet from its glow. Tiger knelt beside her. "Tiger, do something, for God's sake."

"A big snake came after the pup, Tiger." Tim caught at Tiger's hand. "Dougie and me tried to save it, but then its mama came and took it away. The snake wouldn't let go of Dougie's arm. I stamped my feet and waved a stick about like you told me and it went off. Will Dougie be all right?" He was crying silently, tears making little rivulets down his grubby cheeks.

Tiger pressed his lips to the fair hair that was sticking out at all angles.

"It didn't get you, did it, eh?" Tiger looked the child over, lifting his small arms, studying each one carefully.

"No, Tiger, not me." Tim sniffed. "I didn't touch it, like you told me. Dougie will be all right, won't he?" He stared down at his half-brother, his mouth trembling.

Tiger pulled his lips back over his teeth, not answering. What could he say? Gently he pulled Isabella's arms away from Dougie. There were

two bleeding holes on the tiny upper arm.

Jesus! What to do? "We can try to draw the poison out, Bella, but he's so small, I fear it's too late." Never in his life had he felt so useless.

"No!" The eyes she turned on him were those of a wild woman. Clutching his arm, she shook it forcefully. "Try it, you have to do something, Tiger."

Tiger said quietly to the onlookers, "Best fetch Dougal."

"Johnny already went over," someone said in a hollow voice.

Tiger drew his knife out and held it over the fire. His pulse-beat sounded like a drum in his head, pounding out his desperation. He'd seen this tried on a man once, and it had saved his life. He wiped at the sweat dripping down his face then bent to cut a cross over the two marks.

Isabella's face was ashen, filled with despair, as he began to suck and spit. He saw the truth in her eyes; she had as little hope as he that this would work.

Dougie's breathing had already slowed and his skin was growing sallow. And so cold.

"Dougie's gonna be all right, eh Mama?" Tiger suspected Isabella hadn't heard Tim's plaintive plea.

"Let me at my boy!" Dougal's shout echoed from the trees as he came rushing from the riverbank.

Isabella looked up at him. With a wail of anguish he pushed Tiger aside and dropped onto his knees.

"No!" His dark head went back as he roared out the single word.

With a jerk he pulled Tim out of Isabella's arms, thrusting him away so forcefully that he fell.

"Why weren't you watching Dougie, you stupid harlot!" Dougal yelled at Isabella.

"Enough!" Tiger picked Tim up and strode away to hand his boy to Agnes, who hid behind a tent. When he came back, he stood over Dougal, saying as levelly as he was able considering the anger that boiled within him, "There's no need to take it out on your wife, this was no fault of hers."

"No fault of hers!"

Dougal began to shake Dougie as if he could force life back into the limp little body. "'Tis all her fault. The slut never cared for my son. 'Twas always Tim this and Tim that." His mouth twisted. "Why couldn't it have been him?" A shaking finger pointed Tim's way and Tiger

clenched his fists at his sides. "Why not him instead of my boy?" He began to sob as he bent over the small body in his arms.

Tiger could easily have throttled the man with his bare hands at that moment, his hatred for him was so great. Taking a breath, he said in a low voice laced with menace, "I'll forgive you that, for you're in no fit state to think straight."

Dougal laid his son back down and turned stricken eyes on Isabella. Her arms were clenched across her breasts as if she tried to stop herself from falling apart. Still she rocked slightly.

"He's all you ever cared about!" Dougal cried. "You're shameless! Him and his offspring. You would never have let it happen to Tiger Carstairs' precious son. You whore!" He brought his hand back and struck her across the cheek.

With a small cry of disbelief and pain Isabella fell backwards, her hand going to her face. Tiger swore beneath his breath, then grabbed at Dougal's collar to drag him upright. "I told you once before about hitting a woman, didn't I?" He brought his fist back, then drew in a ragged breath as he tried to bring his temper under control. "We all know you're upset, but that's no cause to start taking it out on her, for God's sake! Have you no pity? Can't you see how she's suffering?"

"No cause? What about me? I've suffered in hell, and now my son, the only thing that brought me any happiness in this life, has been taken from me. And all because of her. Sweet Jesus! I ought to kill her. And you too." Jerking upright unsteadily Dougal swung his fist at Tiger.

Tiger sidestepped. God! How could he fight with a man whose son had just died? "Leave it, Dougal," he ordered. The authority in his tone seemed to bring Dougal to his senses. With a shake of the head he knelt down beside Dougie again.

"Too right, we'll settle this between us one way or another," Dougal agreed roughly, taking his son from Isabella.

"Let me have him," Isabella pleaded some time later. Dougal looked at her as if he had no idea who she was, then allowed her to take her child's body.

Isabella ran her hands over the tiny limbs, her sobs racking her. How could God have let this happen to her baby? There had been times when she had lost patience with his tantrums, times she had scolded him for his wilful ways, but Lord, she'd never meant to be so harsh on him. He didn't deserve to die like this.

Perhaps Dougal was right and her sins had finally caught up with

her. Dougal was her husband, yet she'd lusted after Tiger all these years. She'd never given Dougal a chance; no wonder he blamed her. She was Dougie's mother, yet had not protected him from danger.

She held her baby all through the night. Dougal sat by her side, staring starkly at nothing. When Tiger came to help her to her feet she could barely stand, her muscles were so cramped, her limbs stiff with fatigue. But she ignored her bodily pain; the pain in her heart was so great.

Carefully she dressed Dougie in his best clothes, lingering over the task, then she wrapped him in a blanket and carried him to the site Tiger and Thelma had chosen, well away from the riverbank.

The sun was just coming up as Isabella put the last rock in place above his grave. Then, like a puppet whose strings had been cut, she collapsed to the ground.

When Tim began to sob too Tiger picked him up, his eyes sombre as he patted his son's back.

Dougal gave her a bitter glance, then strode away.

"Come, Bella, dear." Thelma pulled at Isabella's arm. "'Tis time to go. There's nothing to be done here now."

Isabella's head went from side to side as she whispered brokenly, "I can't leave him here, Thelma. Don't you see? How can I go away and leave him here all alone? I'm going back to town. I'll take Tim and go back. I can come and be with Dougie then." She rearranged the posy of flowers she had laid on top of the grave.

"No." Tiger put a hand on her shoulder. A shudder ran through her and he felt it right down to his toes. "Look at me, Bella," he ordered.

She obeyed, but her eyes were clouded with grief. There was a coldness about her, as if a part of her had died too. Which he guessed was how it must feel for a woman to lose a child.

Putting Tim on the ground Tiger said bluntly, "There's nothing for you in town. You won't take Tim back with you, for I won't allow it." He cupped her shoulders in his palms, seeing the stubborn glint cross her eyes. At least that was better than the dead coldness that had been there before.

"The mighty Tiger Carstairs giving orders again, eh?" she said, ice running through her tone. "Well, you can't stop me. I'm free now. You don't own me anymore. You can't tell me what to do. Dougal doesn't want me, and you certainly don't. I'm going and there's nothing you can do about it." She held out a shaking hand. "Come Tim, stay with mama."

Dear God, Tiger wanted to hold her so badly that his own arms shook with the force of his longing. Indecisively Tim went to her, but before he could take her outstretched hand Tiger caught him about the middle and hoisted him into his arms.

"The boy stays with me, Bella. Go if you must, take Agnes and enough provisions to get you back to Sydney. But you'll not take my son."

It was a gamble, but the only one he could think of.

"Oh no! Suddenly he's yours, eh?" she shrieked. "You never wanted to lay claim on him before he was born. Give me my son!"

Putting both arms about Tim she tried to wrest him from Tiger. He stepped back and Tim began to whimper.

"Or what?"

"Or I'll kill you!"

Something inside Tiger shrank. Surely she didn't hate him that much. But who could blame her for the way he had treated her over the years. "Bella, come, enough of this, let's get on. Please," he whispered, looking to Thelma entreatingly.

Thelma gently put an arm about Isabella's waist. "Tiger's right, girl. There's little back there for you except a life of whoring. Nothing you do now will bring the little fellow back. You have to come to care for Tim. And me. Lord, but I'd be lost without you. How can I manage with just that trollop Lily as the only woman to talk to in the godforsaken place out yonder?"

Isabella began to weep, deep dragging sobs that seemed to come from her soul. Tiger gripped their son tighter to resist the urge to take her in his arms, to offer comfort. Her grief tore him apart. She would likely spurn his advances anyway. Dougal was the one who should be offering her comfort at this time, but it was doubtful if he would ever recover from his loss. And worse, it was likely that he would never forgive Isabella for what he saw as her negligence.

Tiger took his son to the wagon and handed him up to Johnny, saying, "Get up, Tim."

"Mama," Tim whimpered, his arms outstretched towards Isabella. The action seemed to pull her to her senses and she wiped a fist across her tear-soaked eyes. Silently she allowed Tiger to lift her onto the seat at the front of the wagon. She pulled Tim into her arms, then sat rigidly, staring at the mound of stones covering Dougie's grave, her face pressed to Tim's head.

Tiger stared up at her for a moment, feeling her grief with an intensity that was like a pain. Lifting one of her hands he placed a soft kiss on the knuckle. To his surprise she didn't draw back, but gave him a look that made him ache with longing. With a shuddery sob she pulled Tim close to her breast.

"Hold your mother tight, Tim." Tiger released her and gave Johnny a nod.

Johnny whistled to the lead horse, slapping the leather and they began to make their way down the steep bank and into the water.

Isabella continued to stare at the rough cross marking her baby's grave, craning her neck until it was well out of her sight.

Tiger kept Satan close by her wagon for most of the morning, but she seemed unaware of his presence, her eyes staring ahead as she gripped Tim like a lifeline in a stormy sea.

How many others would have their final resting place along this route in the years to come? Briefly Tiger questioned his decision to drag everyone along with him while he chased his dream.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

It began to rain. The relentless downpour soaked their clothes, the animals, the sacking covering their belongings and provisions. The overhanging branches dripped water on them, at times lashing their faces as they rode beneath huge trees.

Isabella barely registered the drops that ran from her hair and down her nose onto her lap. Numbness filled every fibre of her being. The rain had soaked right through to her undergarments, but she hardly noticed.

"I'm wet, Mama," Tim grizzled.

"We're all wet, son," she said quietly.

"Will Dougie come back one day, Mama? After he's been asleep awhile?" he asked for the tenth time.

"No, Tim. Our Dougie's gone for good." Her voice cracked over the blunt statement.

"Where's he gone, Mama?"

"I've told you already Tim, he's gone to heaven."

"But where's that Mama, and when will I see him again?"

"You'll see him when you go there, Tim, but that won't be for years and years." Dear God, if she lost him too she would die of the grief. A part of her had died already.

Tim complained when she tightened her grip on him. Would they ever grow accustomed to life in this godforsaken place? The dangers she'd faced on the streets of Stepney paled into insignificance against the far greater dangers they faced here. Damn Tiger Carstairs for dragging her and the boys along with him. Dougie would still be alive if they hadn't left the security of the town. At that moment the feelings she harboured for the arrogant bastard bordered on hatred.

"We'll wait out the worst of this," she heard him order as he rode up alongside them. "'Tis easing ahead. We'll make camp and get the fires going, dry out as soon as it stops."

"What about Ginger and the others?" Thelma asked.

"They'll carry on and wait for us at the foot of the mountain road."

Isabella shivered. Her relief made her feel faint. Dougal was like a volcano waiting to erupt and she feared his anger. She couldn't bear to

see the reproach she knew would be in his eyes.

"Get Thelma dry as soon as you can," Tiger said softly as he brought his horse alongside the wagon. "If she sits around in those wet clothes she'll end up with a sickness in her chest. Her cough is already worse."

Isabella turned a frosty glare on him. "And whose fault is that? If you hadn't dragged us to this godawful place I'd still have Dougie and Thelma wouldn't be coughing fit to burst!"

Tiger stared wordlessly at her, sorrow clear in his eyes, before riding off.

Isabella felt momentarily ashamed of her outburst. Why did he always bring out the worst in her? Deep down she knew that the same fate could have befallen Dougie back at the farm, and she shouldn't really be blaming Tiger.

Thelma's cough had got worse in the last couple of hours, seeming to tear at her chest. Jesus! If she lost Thelma too she'd likely go insane.

Tiger ordered the men to rig a sheet of sacking above the fire using the branches of a wide reaching tree, criss-crossing it with strips of bark to keep off the worst of the rain.

"Here, get this inside you," Isabella ordered Thelma, scooping a mugful of warmed-up mutton stew from the iron pot over the fire.

Thelma gave her a wan smile. "Thanks, Bella. I feel a whole lot better now I've got some dry clothes on."

"Aye, 'tis lucky we found some that hadn't been soaked. Tiger seems to think this will ease." Isabella eyed the grey laden sky with less optimism. "Best get between the blankets straight after eating and keep as warm as you can."

The rain fell in torrents until just before dawn, seeping in underneath the tents and making them all shiver with misery. Isabella slept not a wink, but stared up at the roof of the tent with eyes that felt as if they were filled with dust. Tiger's forecast wasn't far out, for the sun came up bright and blessedly warm.

Giving Isabella a critical once over he suggested, "We'll lie over for the day and dry everything out. The rest will do you good."

"I doubt a rest will go anywhere near to helping me," she snapped, hating to admit that she felt bone weary; so tired in fact that when she lay beneath a tree with Tim in her arms she slept for most of the morning.

"Time heals," Thelma was saying when she opened her eyes to stare about.

"Tim!" Isabella looked about with frantic urgency when she couldn't see him anywhere.

Tiger came to sit at her side, placing a hand on her shoulder when she made to scramble to her feet. "He's helping Agnes, Lily, and the men to collect the dried clothes from the lines they strung up," he said gently. "You can't watch him every minute of the day, Bella. The same thing won't happen to him that happened to Dougie."

She shook his hand off, crying, "How do you know?" as she jumped up. "You're not God. You think you have authority over everything that moves!" Suddenly she lashed out at him, thumping him about the shoulders and ears, wherever she could reach, while she sobbed out meaningless words.

Tiger made no move to stop her or defend himself. When the storm had passed and she began to weep, her head bent, he got up and wrapped her in his arms, touching his lips to her hair. Her bonnet had gone flying to the ground and her hair fell in a flaming tangle over her shoulders. That fool Dougal should be consoling her. But at this moment Tiger was glad the Scotsman was far away.

"I'm all right," she mumbled after a while, pushing away from him and scuffing a fist over her nose. With a sheepish glance at the others, who'd pretended they hadn't heard her outburst, she wiped at her eyes. "I'm sorry. No reason to hit out at you. It just seems so unfair. Why did it have to happen to my baby? All these wicked people in the colony and God saw fit to take my little boy."

"I can't answer that, Bella. None of us know why these things happen. 'Tis fate an' there's nothing we can do but accept it as the will of God, or whatever force guides us while we are in this world."

He wasn't sure if she had heard a word that he said. Helplessness wasn't something he was familiar with, but he was suffering a surfeit of it right now. As if all the stuffing had been taken out of her she suddenly crumpled to the ground, where she pulled her knees up, resting her face on them.

Tiger fought the urge to smooth a hand over her bent head. "Tim," he called, looking about. When the boy came running, he patted his hair instead, ordering gently, "Look after your mama for me, eh?" Going down on his haunches he said, "Now I'm relying on you to take care of her. Do you think you can do that for me?"

Isabella glanced sideways at him as Tim nodded. "Yes, Tiger," he agreed. "I miss Dougie too."

Tiger sighed. "Aye son, I know."

"I'm not your son, I'm Dad's son," Tim argued, squinting at him.

Tiger shook his head. "I know, Tim. It was just a sort of name some people call boys, I didn't mean anything by it." He ruffled his son's hair.

Isabella met his eyes and for endless moments they stared at each other. Tiger touched a finger to her cheek, catching a teardrop. Then he rose and strode away, his back straight.

"It looks greater than any obstacle I've ever seen," Johnny said with awe as they approached the start of the road over the mountains. "Do you think the boss knows what he's doing?"

Isabella shrugged. "Tiger thinks he knows everything. If he says we'll get over, then we will." Personally she would be rather glad if he decided he had taken on altogether too much and turned them around. The mountains with their ever-present haze of blue looked daunting and somehow eerie. She was scared, feeling as if she was about to fall off the edge of the world. About to step over a line into some strange place that was totally alien.

The hollow emptiness that had been there constantly since Dougie's death was replaced by a sinking feeling in her stomach that she recognised as fear.

Tiger had told them that for forty-odd miles there would be no grass for the cattle; they'd had to fetch corn. The sheep could manage. But the fact that there was not enough grass in the mountains seemed mighty peculiar.

"Whoa!" The shout went up, dragging her from her reverie. The bullocks and horses were stopped, and the cavalcade came to a rumbling halt. Isabella's wagon was at the rear, so she couldn't tell what the problem was.

She soon found out. "The leading dray's stuck in the sandy bottom of a stream," Tiger shouted as he pulled up alongside them. "We'll need all men to get behind and heave. You come with me, Johnny."

It took them an hour to extricate the dray. Then another hour to get all the others across, using ropes and chains to haul them. A quarter of a mile on they were at the foot of the first mountain.

"Saints preserve us!" Johnny muttered as they and everyone in the party stared at the ascent they faced.

As far as the eye could see were lofty trees and shrubs, most blooming with an abundance of brightly coloured flowers.

"This is Lapstone Hill," Tiger said as he watched the first wagon start upwards.

"Why's it called that, Tiger?" Tim asked.

Tiger shaded his eyes to look up at the monstrous hill ahead of them. "Seems the stones reminded the first men over of the cobblers' lapstone, Tim."

Isabella gave him a sour look. The man was as excited as a boy with a new toy. The track up the hill appeared to be solid rock with no earth covering, and great hollow places and jagged rocks protruding here and there. The horses managed it with little trouble, but the bullocks didn't fare at all well, refusing to pull their loads.

Tiger swiped his hat on his thigh, roaring, "Stubborn coves! Take half the load off the drays again and use the horses, men."

"At this pace we'll probably still be going over these godforsaken mountains come Christmas," Johnny said as the horses went up and down uncountable times, assisting the bullocks.

It looked as if he might be proven right when at the end of the day they had only covered about a mile and a half. Everyone was so exhausted they barely had the will to pitch the tents and cook the salted beef for supper. Damper had been made in a camp oven the previous night, fortunately, saving them that trouble.

One large fire had been lit instead of the usual two. With the party all enclosed by the night, the animals milling nearby for their safety, and the wind whistling through the branches of the trees, it made for an eerie scene.

Thelma looked around after the meal was cleared away, asking, "Where's Dougal? I haven't seen him since we ate, have you? I would have thought he'd want to be with you."

Ginger sat nearby, smoking his pipe. He planned to spend this night in Thelma's tent, and she'd hinted she expected Dougal to share Isabella's. Though why she should think that when he had treated Isabella with such contempt she had no idea.

Poor Thelma always hoped for reconciliation between them. Isabella knew that would never happen; especially now. She shrugged, not caring tuppence where Dougal was. Let him go sit with the sheep. Anywhere but near her. Lily was also missing, Isabella noted. But that was nothing strange – the doxie had likely found a sleeping place with

one or more of the men.

Thelma pulled a face as she rose, both hands pressed to her lower back, saying, "Ah well, I'm off to sleep. It's been a terrible day."

Isabella nodded. "I'll be off now too."

Agnes was already asleep with Tim, the two curled together like two puppies. Suddenly a raucous laugh bounced off the trees, disturbing a flock of birds, who began to flap around in distress. One of the men on the other side of the camp shouted something she didn't catch. But she heard Dougal's name and out of curiosity turned back to see what the hilarity was about. It was strange, she mused, that Dougal could be part of a joke after what had happened to little Dougie.

Dougal was coming into the circle of light thrown by the fire. With his arm looped about Lily's waist, he looked purposefully across the camp. He appeared to be searching Isabella out. And when he caught her eye he bent to plant a kiss on Lily's cheek. The harlot shoved him in the chest, laughed, and then kissed him full on the mouth.

Isabella gasped with revulsion.

Tiger stepped out of the shadows and stood in front of Dougal, menace in his stance. "What in hell's name d'you think you're up to, man?" he rasped. "Your wife needs you beside her in her time of grief and you're off with this baggage playing the fool!" Lily began to snigger.

"Get away from me!" Dougal pushed at Tiger's chest, then made to walk past him.

Tiger gripped his arm and said something low that Isabella couldn't catch. Dougal lashed out, catching Tiger on the side of his neck. Tiger brought a fist up to Dougal's jaw. Dougal reeled backwards as the knuckle made contact and Lily screamed, both hands over her mouth as the two men grappled before tumbling to the ground.

"I'll kill you," Isabella heard Dougal snarl before Tiger punched him again.

As they rolled over and over, nearing the fire, Tiger bellowed, "I ought to kill you, you blackguard. You're a no-good son of the devil the way you treat Bella. Why would you want to go off with that doxie when you have a wife who's grieving for her child!" Tiger came onto his knees, clutching at Dougal's shoulders to shake him roughly.

"That doxie, as you call her, doesn't treat me like half a man. My precious wife doesn't want me, never has," Dougal sneered. "It's you she's always wanted; well, she can have you now. I never want

anything more to do with her. She let my son get hisself killed. If she had been watching over him like she's always watched over the other little bastard he'd still be alive!"

Tiger roared an oath and smashed his fist into Dougal's face. Dougal's head flopped to one side. He went still and Lily screamed.

"Shut up, woman!" Tiger warned in an icy tone. It had the desired effect. With a long look at Dougal's still form she strutted off towards the other men.

"Keep your filthy whore's hands off him from now on, do you hear me? Or else you'll be heading back to town," Tiger warned.

Lily snivelled a reply.

Isabella hesitated. Should she go to Dougal? But the thought of what he'd said about her filled her with loathing. How could he possibly accuse her of caring for one son more than the other?

She dropped the tent flap and lay down beside Tim. He murmured something in his sleep, wrapping his tiny arms about her neck. Isabella pulled him close to her breast and kissed his beloved face.

Isabella was relieved Dougal was off with the animals the next morning. No one had offered to tend his bruises. Even Thelma, who reappeared when she'd heard the rumpus, had not given Dougal any aid. She seemed as disgusted with him as Tiger and Ginger.

"Men! Lord knows but at times I think their brains are between their legs," was all she said on the subject to Isabella. But Isabella knew she'd had more than a few sharp words to say to Lily.

Dougal's face was a mess, and he'd taken his bread and tea off with him rather than sit with the others for the morning meal.

"Good! Let's hope he stays with his blessed sheep," Isabella said to herself. If he'd had little chance of getting back into her bed before, he had none at all now. If he thought she would let him touch her now after lying with that diseased whore he was mistaken.

The track led them through lofty flowering trees. "'Tis surely beautiful land, but useless," Isabella said to Johnny, who agreed. "There's no vegetables or fruits to pick."

Tim was riding with Tiger, sitting in front of him on the saddle. Every now and then he waved to her. He had regained some of his good humour, but still asked her constantly about Dougie. By now everyone

in the party must know he was Tiger's son, for even had they not heard Dougal's outcry it was blatant when the two of them were side by side.

Isabella's heart hurt. If only she could have another baby one day to take Dougie's place. But that was out of the question now.

That night they camped in front of a government stockkeeper's hut, no more than a barn in a clearing. Tiger said he had been warned that the wife of the corporal who lived here along with two soldiers was a thief and not to be trusted.

The house was roughly furnished with table and chairs made from tree stumps, a sofa fashioned from strips of bark. Thelma was deeply disappointed to find the place alive with bugs, for she'd looked forward to a night beneath a roof of wood for once.

Isabella cared not where she set her head down for the night. Sleep eluded her anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Isabella grimaced at Tiger where he sat with the men. They sipped the rum he'd handed out to revive their spirits after another dreadful day. He looked smug and contented, like a man who had faced mighty obstacles and conquered them.

"I knew he was mad, Thelma!" she exclaimed.

"I must say I thought we was about to meet our maker when we came over that steep ridge." Thelma shook her head. "And the noise made my head ache something awful. What with the men swearing at the animals, the dogs barking, and the bullocks bellowing, it was sheer purgatory. Then that perishing shaft broke. Eight miles in a day! I knew we'd be forever on this journey."

The road was cut through forest with not one straight stretch. They'd gone around the edges of hills where the drop was so steep Isabella had known real terror that they would go over into a bottomless ravine. The bullocks had often refused to go up, even lying down so the dogs were called on to bite their noses to force them onto their feet again while the teamsters roared obscenely at the obstinate animals.

The horses had been brought back down to aid the bullocks who found it hard to get past the jutting rocks. By the time they'd reached the top it was dark and Tiger and two of the men had gone off to search for a spring.

"I suggest you sleep in your clothes," he said now, coming over to them. "If this rain keeps up you'll need them for warmth." His eyes ran over Isabella's hunched form.

"You're a madman, Tiger Carstairs!" She glared up at him.

"Perhaps," he agreed.

"No perhaps about it," she assured his back as he walked away.

The days followed the same pattern. The bullocks refused to budge and the horses helped them up slopes. Some nights the men didn't lie down until well after midnight. Each night they were exhausted, yet they barely covered eight or nine miles a day over the terrible terrain.

Tim had grown fretful and Isabella felt so dreadfully tired and filled with misery that at times she wished she could just fall down and go to sleep never to wake up. Thelma's cough grew steadily worse, and her cheeks hollow, losing weight she could ill afford.

They let the bullocks free to forage for food again then wasted a day looking for them. But at least it provided them with a rest day. They made damper and a cake in the camp oven, which cheered them. Tim rarely left Isabella's side, his eyes filled with a wariness that clutched at her heart. The pups had been transferred to the uncovered wagon, for he'd lost interest in them.

Then they came to Mount York.

Everybody knew its reputation and had been speaking of it in awed whispers over the previous evening's meal. A brooding quiet now crept over them as Tiger brought Satan up and handed Tim, who'd been riding with him, over to Isabella.

Johnny grimaced, scratching at his head, as Tiger rode off to speak to the driver of the leading wagon. The valley coming up to what was commonly called The Big Hill was awful, the road hidden from view amid the trees.

Small trees had to be lopped to wedge behind the wheels of the drays and wagons to stop them slipping backwards. It was gruelling work. When they got to the top they had to reverse the order, chaining logs behind to stop them from sliding forwards.

"The other slopes were nothing compared to this," Isabella whispered, a hand to her throat, as she, Thelma and Agnes stared wide-eyed and fearful at the steep drop before them. The animals that had already been taken over couldn't be seen at the bottom, about a mile away.

"Tiger says we're about four thousand feet above the sea." Thelma was having trouble drawing each breath and her face was so grey that it scared Isabella as much as the road they must descend.

Tiger shouted orders, and the first dray began its cautious descent, sliding on the surface made slippery by rain.

"Come on, we'd better start walking," Isabella said, glancing to where Tiger watched the progress intently.

The three women began to walk, Tim clutching at Isabella's hand. Her other hand kept her skirt high to stop her from tripping. Lily trailed them, keeping her distance. Thelma waved to Ginger, who waited with Dougal and the group of men watching the slow descent of the dray.

The going was so steep that stones tumbled beneath their feet and they had to keep their bodies balanced backwards to stop from falling headlong down the slope.

"I'll have to rest," Thelma groaned when they'd barely gone a hundred feet. "My legs are aching fit to drop off."

"So are mine." Isabella was panting, her calves burning. They flopped down on a log to one side of the track and she squinted up the hill. The dray had moved barely a few feet, and the cursing of the men rang through the trees. "Don't look like they're making much progress."

"Heavens, this isn't fit to call a road," Thelma complained. "Where Tiger got the notion from to drag us into this hell, I'm sure I don't know!" With a hand to her chest she dragged in air as if starved of it. "This time he's bit off . . . a bit more than he can chew!"

Barely had the words left her mouth when a cry went up, bouncing off the other hills. The bullocks began to bellow, and the teamsters to yell. Pandemonium broke out.

"Heavens, it's slipping! They can't hold it, Thelma!"

Isabella stood up, a hand pressed to her mouth as her eyes widened in horror. The dray had slewed sideways. Men were shouting, the dray was groaning, and stones were sliding beneath its wheels, tumbling and rolling towards them. The horses began to whinny, high shrill sounds that proclaimed their fear.

"It's coming apart," Isabella cried. "My God, it looks as if the kingbolt has come out!"

The wagon body along with the load was sliding one way while the forecarriage and bullocks were going in the other direction.

"Get about this side," she heard Tiger shout loud and clear among the confusion. "In heaven's name get your weight behind it!"

"Hang onto Tim, and don't let him follow me." Isabella thrust his small hand into Agnes's. Picking up a handful of her skirt she began to climb. Her bad foot began to sting with pain and her breath became laboured as she put one foot in front of the other, feeling as if she was trying to run through molasses.

As she neared the dray she saw that the teamster, thankfully, had his bullocks well out of the way. But the wagon body had almost overturned and had come to a standstill at an awkward angle, its rear end near the precipice. Its load was scattered, some trunks and boxes just saved by stumps and branches from falling over the edge.

Tiger and the men were groaning as they pressed their shoulders to

the front of the dray, trying to prevent it from sliding nearer to the great drop. Their faces were wreathed in sweat, contorted with the effort. Isabella could smell their fear.

"No!"

Tiger was near the edge and he looked up at her scream. The dray shifted and he roared an oath. It was then that Isabella saw the man trapped beneath a wheel.

Isabella knew she would be haunted by the agonised cry that tore from the mouth of the trapped man all her days.

The horses further up the hill pranced about, calling out their anxiety, and were joined by the bullocks bellowing their fear. Isabella pressed her hands over her ears. Everybody seemed to be shouting.

But Tiger's voice overrode every other as he shouted orders for them to lift as they pushed. Then Tiger's roared, "No!" echoed across the hills, as the crushed man went over the edge. The body crashed through the bushes, tumbling and falling for what seemed an eternity.

The ensuing silence was so intense that a bird's sudden song pierced it shatteringly.

Isabella limped over to where the men all stared mutely over the precipice, their faces showing utter confusion and horror.

"Get the rope. I'll have to go down." Tiger threw his hat to the ground as he shouted the order.

"You can't do anything, man. He'd have no chance down there." Ginger touched his arm. Tiger shook him off.

"Who is it?" Isabella asked in a low voice. Tiger gave her a swift glance then looked abruptly away to where the man was fetching a rope.

"Aw, girl." Ginger pushed his hat back and rubbed his head where sweat trickled down, making dirty streaks across his forehead.

A cold fear settled in Isabella's stomach.

Ginger looked at Tiger, then back at her, his head going slowly from side to side. "'Tis Dougal, I'm afraid, girl," he said quietly. "The lad got hisself caught under the wheel. He was probably dead before he went over. Tell Tiger he can't do this. What's the use of him killing hisself too." He laid a hand on her shoulder, squeezing it.

Isabella tried to swallow. A great lump had lodged somewhere in her throat. She tried to speak but no words came out. Wrapping her arms over her chest she rocked back on her heels. This was a nightmare!

"I have to do it, Ginger. He could be alive still," she heard Tiger say as he tied the rope about his waist. "Make sure 'tis held taut." He

yanked at the end of the rope he'd secured about a sturdy tree stump, then stepped to the edge, looking down.

Isabella clutched at his arm, hanging on tenaciously. "No!" she cried. "You'll not go down!" She turned appealingly to Ginger, then back again. "If Ginger says he's dead, then that's it. No sense in two of you dying. Tell him, Ginger! He can't do this. 'Tis madness."

She saw the stubborn intent in Tiger's eyes, and blanched. God! If he died, a part of her would wither and die too. At the back of her brain it occurred to her that she didn't feel such sentiments for poor Dougal. Yes, she felt a deep sorrow for him, but her friend had died on the night she'd married him, replaced by a stranger she neither respected nor loved.

"He's my husband." Her chin lifted as she outstared Tiger. "I have the right to decide." Glancing over the precipice she shuddered. Dougal's body was nowhere to be seen. "No man could live after falling down there. And he was already injured. I beg you, Tiger, please don't risk it. Perhaps there's another way through lower down," she added, knowing they wouldn't have a hope of finding a body in the unending dense undergrowth.

Tiger clenched his fists. She was right of course. The dray had crushed Dougal, he had been dead before going over the cliff. He would have been torn to ribbons, his body shattered by the fall. Doubtless the rope wouldn't even take Tiger as far as Dougal had fallen.

Running his fingers over his head he took a few paces away then came back to her. With a shuddering sigh he said, "If that's how you want it, then so be it. But be it on your head." His look encompassed everyone nearby. "Let no one ever accuse me of not being prepared to do all in my power to rescue the man."

"No one could blame you, Tiger." Ginger looked about at the others, his eyes daring anyone to contradict him. "'Twas a sorry accident."

"I hate not being able to bury a man decently," Tiger insisted. He released the rope and let it fall around his feet, staring over the edge. He wasn't about to mention it, but there were all sorts of wild creatures out there that would soon devour the remains. Ye gods, what if Dougal wasn't dead! Would he be able to live with the knowledge that he had left a man to perish.

"Jesus!"

Tiger saw Isabella collapse to the ground. Rushing over to her he caught her before her head hit rock. "Bella! Get me a blanket, someone,"

he yelled as he lifted her limp body.

Carrying her to a patch of moss, away from the steep drop, he took the blanket and covered her with it. Taking her hands in his he began to chafe them. She was so cold. How much more would she have to suffer?

"I'll go down and tell Thelma," Ginger said, gently touching Tiger's shoulder. "I'll tell them to carry on to the bottom." He looked about as if trying to decide what needed to be done. "I'd best take the tinder box so they can light a fire."

"Aye, and take some tea and meat. This will take a while to clear up." Tiger glanced grimly from the wagon to Isabella. "Bella can make her way down as soon as she feels up to it."

Tiger knelt at her side when Ginger walked off. Had he been a fool to start out on this trip? Heaven knew he'd never dreamed things would turn out like this.

Rubbing her hands again he tried to bring some warmth back to her. She was so pale, looked as fragile as fine glass. But that was just an illusion; she was stronger than he in some ways. Thank the Lord for that. For she was going to need that strength of character to see her through this mess. He looked about, wondering what to do next. She began to mumble.

"What?" he asked, bending to hear the weak words. "What is it, Bella?"

"Dougie? My baby?" she whispered as she tried to lift her head.

Tiger stroked her cheek. She was obviously in a stupor, thinking it was the boy who'd been killed just now. As gently as he could he told her, "Dougie's gone, Bella. And so is Dougal."

She began to weep, her sobs making her whole body shudder.

Tiger wrapped his arms about her, rocking her and murmuring soft words of love and understanding. She didn't seem to hear, but kept moaning until the sobs subsided.

Isabella suddenly came to her senses. Tiger was holding her! What was she doing in his arms? With a push at his chest she sent him sprawling. "What do you think you're doing?" she demanded, straightening her skirt as she glanced about to see that the men were all watching her.

Then she remembered. Covering her face with her hands she groaned.

"Dougal?" Lowering her hands she gazed at Tiger. One glance told her it was all over. "I know."

He nodded. "Do you think you can go down with Thelma now? We'll get one wagon down as soon as possible." He looked to the darkening sky. "Looks like this mess and the rest will have to wait 'til morning, though. It will be night soon."

Something compelled her to go and stand at the edge where Dougal had gone over. With head bowed she said a silent prayer for the man who'd once been such a good friend to her.

Poor Dougal; gone forever. With no son even to carry on his name and his likeness. Rubbing her eyes, she shuddered as a picture of Dougal leaning on the ship's rail came to her. How eager he'd been to start out in this strange new land. All he'd really wanted was her love and his precious sheep.

Turning, she saw a strange look in Tiger's golden eyes; a look she might suspect was longing, if she didn't know him better.

"I'm sorry, Bella," he said quietly.

"Aye, so am I."

Drawing herself up straight she made her way down the slope, sliding and tripping, so that she landed on her bottom.

"Let's get this to one side, and let the wagon through," she heard Tiger order above her as she stumbled down the track.

She ran into Thelma's arms when she caught up with her near the bottom of the incline. Then, clutching Tim to her breast, she said shakily, "You're all I have now, son. Don't you leave me, will you?" Tim clung to her, his beloved warm little body giving Isabella comfort.

CHAPTER THIRTY

When the first dray rumbled down at dawn, the noise along with the shouting of the men was dreadful. As well as the logs being dragged behind on chains others were placed beneath the wheels at intervals to stop them from sliding and toppling the bullocks.

The men were sick with fatigue when the last one came to a standstill. Their cheers were half-hearted, and despite their grumbling and complaining, Tiger allowed them only a short respite before urging them to prepare to move on.

"I think last night and this morning will live in my memory forever Thelma," Isabella said as they went to the wagons.

"Aye, mine too, girl."

They had slept side by side on the ground beneath the wagon, both only catching snatches of sleep.

"Now we have Cox's River to face, and Ginger reckons it isn't going to be easy getting over."

He was right. By the look on Tiger's face as they looked on the treacherous river this was going to be the worst crossing so far.

Tiger rode across to test the depth. His horse was wet nearly to its withers and Tiger's breeches soaked when he came back.

"Right, take your wagon over first, Johnny," he ordered. "And, Jones," he pointed to a rider, "you take hold of the lead horse and guide it along, all right?"

He stopped to spare Isabella a glance, before riding to the following dray. "And you men keep the bullocks moving, whatever happens, do you hear me?"

Johnny pulled a face as he looked sideways at Isabella, before slapping the reins on the rumps of the horses. They began to move slowly down the slope into the fast flowing river, Jones urging the lead horse forward.

"Hang onto me, Tim, and don't let go." Isabella clutched at her son as the wagon tipped at a precarious angle entering the water, and the front horses balked when it swirled about their bellies.

"Keep them moving, man!" Tiger roared, splashing Satan into the river and waving his whip as the wagon hit a rock and wobbled. Isabella

suppressed a scream of fear when a jolt vibrated through her, and Tim's lower lip trembled. She gave him what she hoped was a comforting smile, pressing him tighter to her side.

The men swore, cursed, and cajoled the animals until after what seemed an eternity they reached the far bank.

"Hallelujah!" the men chorused, whooping as Johnny pulled up well away from the river.

"Thank the Lord," Johnny whispered. Taking off his cabbage-tree hat he wiped at his head with a fist. "I ain't a religious man, missus, but I sure as hell thank Him if He was what stopped us from going under."

It took hours of laborious work to get everyone and all the animals across. The bullocks decided to be water-shy and the sheep had to be coaxed and hard-pressed. Every man stood nigh on chest high in water to ensure no creature got pulled downstream by the current.

As they all lay on their backs, taking a breather after the exertion, Tiger declared, "We'll camp here for a day where there's good pasture for the animals."

Hats were tossed in the air as they all shouted their pleasure.

"Thank heavens!" Thelma said to Isabella. "What I need more than anything is a bath and a change of clothing. I'm beginning to stink like one of those pigs yonder."

"The pigs don't stink, Thelma, they've just had a bath," Tim told her indignantly. He liked the pigs.

Tiger overheard, and suggested, "You women and Tim take the first go at bathing. But take care not to go beyond the stretch where we crossed. We don't know how deep it gets further upriver. And for God's sake watch out for snakes."

No need to warn us about them, Isabella thought, her lip curling bitterly.

Tiger ensured that no man ventured near while they stripped to their underthings and washed their hair and bodies. Agnes and Lily then washed their filthy clothing and it was hung to dry, along with the men's trousers and shirts, on a line strung between two red-barked eucalyptus trees.

After the evening meal they sat around the fire talking in a desultory way. The men were circled around their own fire a short distance away, Lily with them. Agnes went to bed with Tim as soon as she'd eaten. Isabella peeped in soon after to see them both sound asleep.

Thelma yawned and stretched. "Well, I'm away to my bed too," she

said, patting Ginger's knee as he sat staring at the flames, puffing at his pipe. "Coming along, Ginger?"

"Aye, love, it's been a tiring couple of days." He stood up and touched his forelock. "Dougal will be sorely missed," he said softly to Isabella. "I just wanted to say that I will not find another man as good with sheep as that young fellow. I know things weren't good with you two for a long time, girl, and at times I blamed you. But I just wanted you to know that I don't blame you for the way things were between you."

Isabella touched his outstretched hand. "Thank you, Ginger, that's decent of you."

He nodded and followed Thelma to their tent, dropping the flap after them.

Isabella had left her hair loose to dry. She pushed it back and got onto her knees. "I'll be off to my bed as well," she said.

Tiger leant over and placed a hand on her arm. "Stay awhile, Bella," he urged. "I don't feel like sleeping yet." He pulled a wry face as he glanced about. "And there's nobody else here whose company I'd like to keep."

"Thanks." She sighed tiredly. "So, I'm to keep you company because I happen to be the only one available."

"I didn't mean that and you know it. Please stay and talk to me." The note of pleading in his tone made her raise her brows. "I need to be with you, and I think you need to be with me."

He tugged gently on her arm and after staring at him a while she sat back down, sighing.

"Why the sudden need to be with me? You've not sought my company for so long I reckon there were times you forgot I existed." The flames drew her eyes and she gazed into the fire.

"Never." Tiger moved closer, pressing his thigh on hers. "You're in my blood, woman. I look at you and something in me comes alive as it never has with any other woman, and that's the truth."

She shrugged, pulling at a clump of grass. "Missing your mistress already, eh? Agnes is too young, Lily too free and easy with the labourers, so Bella will do, is that it?" Angrily she tossed the plucked grass away.

Tiger swore, pushing his hair back as he swallowed. "By God, you have a low opinion of me, don't you?"

"What have you ever done that I should have a high opinion of you, pray tell me?" Her lips curled.

"True. I guess I've lived up to my name of English pig, eh?" He chuckled, but there was little mirth in the sound. "Have you ever wanted to turn back time, start all over again?" She shook her head. "Well, I have, many a time," he confessed. "Do you know, I often wish we could wipe out words we should never have said and deeds that should never have been committed."

"Words unexpressed will doubtless fall dead, but God himself can't kill them once they're said," she quoted. "Same goes for deeds. So, best thing is not to do anything you'd be sorry for, isn't it?"

"Mmm, too late for me though. I'll probably rot in the hell you confined me to a long time ago." He lifted her hand and Isabella stared into his eyes where the flames of the fire were reflected. She made a soft sound of disbelief.

"If what you have in mind is what I think it is, then you can just forget it, Tiger Carstairs," she commanded, shrinking back when he ran a finger up and down her forearm, then began to stroke her wrist where she could feel her pulse beating rapidly.

"And what am I thinking of doing?" he wondered, searching her eyes intently.

"You think to have your way with me because we're here on our own. But you can think again!" Pushing at his chest she freed her hand and started to move away. He lay back with a heavy sigh, his hands under his head, and she relaxed.

"What do you take me for, Bella? I just wanted to offer you comfort. Dougal's not cold yet and I feel sick with worrying that he may have been alive when we left him. Jesus!" He pushed himself onto his elbows and groaned. "Bella, suppose he was still alive? I'll rot in hell for sure if he was. It was unforgivable not to go down and check on him. How could I not have tried?"

His face wore such a genuine look of grief and regret that she couldn't help putting her arms about him. "Don't torture yourself so, Tiger. 'Twas my decision. I didn't want you to take the risk. I'd die if anything happened to you," she whispered, her voice catching. She knew she had confessed too much, but it was too late to take it back.

"And I'll die if I don't taste your sweet mouth once more." With a mumbled word she couldn't understand he pulled her down and twisted until his body was covering hers, pressing her into the soft tufts of grass. "Bella, Bella," he murmured before his mouth slanted over hers.

Welcoming his heavy weight she circled his body with her arms,

returning the kiss in full measure.

"It's been so long," he said, dropping kisses all over her face.

"Aye." It had. It seemed a lifetime since she'd known the ecstasy of his lovemaking.

"I'm dying for you. I need to be inside you. Can I please make love to you, Bella?"

Speechless, she pulled back to stare hard at him. Her head moved in a small nod of acceptance. That was the first time Tiger had ever asked for anything. It was her undoing.

Silently he made love to her beside the fire, while a short distance away the men laughed and talked. One of them played on a makeshift pipe, and the haunting melody wove itself around Isabella's heart, imprinted itself on her memory as the taste and feel of Tiger had and always would.

He caressed her with a kind of reverence, his strong hands tracing a path over her body as he unclothed her. How sweet it was to feel his touch again; to share in the wonder only he could conjure.

Night birds called above them, and the air was filled with the scents of wild blossoms as he touched her, kissed her, gently at first, then with growing passion. The surroundings dissolved, leaving just the two of them in a world of their own making, a world where the senses ruled.

Without being conscious of when or how it happened she found that they were naked in each other's arms. Tiger's hands and mouth sought out every pleasure point, making her moan and writhe as he brought her slowly to a wondrous pinnacle of desire. Their lovemaking was fiery and wild, tender yet fierce. Only Tiger could excite her so, bring every sense alive. Their bodies fitted together like two parts of a whole.

"Touch me," he insisted, taking her hand and pressing it to where he throbbed with blatant need. Isabella obeyed, thrilling again to the excitement of sharing such intimacies with the only man she would ever love. Perhaps tomorrow she would have doubts, but for this one moment out of time she was his. And he was hers alone.

With a groan, he pressed his hand over hers. "Enough," he whispered hoarsely, rolling her onto her back and sliding inside her. "I never realised what I was asking of you. You drive me to insanity with your touch, my sweet witch."

If she drove him to insanity, it was nothing compared to the effect he had on her. As he rose and fell with an exquisite rhythm, she met his

every thrust, abandoning herself to the supreme joy, the absolute pleasure gained when two hearts soared to the place only lovers ever reached. To where the world dissolved and all cares were cast aside.

When Isabella returned to earth, they lay staring wordlessly at each other for what seemed like an eternity, each stroking the other's face. He seemed reluctant to separate their bodies, still keeping her imprisoned with his weight as he brushed back her damp hair, dropping small kisses on her nose, cheeks and eyelids. Isabella sighed. It had been a long time since she'd known such peace; perhaps she never had known it before.

But then Lily's coarse laughter invaded the idyll. The sharp sound grated on Isabella's nerves, bringing her back to her senses. Remorse and shame hit her. She tried to push Tiger away, but he refused to budge, holding her imprisoned with his body.

"What is it?" he asked, a note of uncertainty clouding his tone.

"What is it? How can you ask? I'm no better than Lily," she snapped. "Get off me." She thumped at his arm, but he still would not allow her up.

"Don't ever lump yourself in with that doxie!" He went onto his elbows, relieving her of most of his weight, and gave her an exasperated look. "I told you long ago that I changed my ideas about that!"

Isabella made a soft sound of derision, then forcefully pushed again at his shoulders. This time he rolled away.

"Bella, don't go," he begged, catching hold of her by the wrist. With his thumb he traced a circle on the place where her pulse thrummed.

"You took advantage of me while I was in a low state," she shot at him in a fierce whisper, knowing she talked nonsense.

"I took advantage?" With a soft curse he let her go. She felt around for the clothes she had so carelessly discarded. "You were as eager for me as I was for you. It has always been so between us and always will be."

Isabella pulled her dress over her head. "No, Tiger! Don't touch me again, do you hear? Why is it you do this to me!"

"I do nothing to you that you don't desire as much as I. Stay Bella, please."

Isabella knew she must ignore the thread of pleading in his voice, or be lost again. She could not let him own her body as he already owned her soul. How could she let him take her over every time he so decided?

For one brief moment she stared down at him, at his magnificent flesh gleaming in the moonlight, then, clutching the rest of her garments

to her breast, she ran.

He was tugging his breeches on as she went into her tent. She ignored his soft call, pressing her palms to her ears as she lay down beside Tim and Agnes.

In the name of heaven, what was wrong with her! The answer to that was simple. He was in her blood same as he swore she was in his. How could she ever fight something that was as inevitable as day following night?

Tiger was at her side the moment she emerged bleary-eyed from the tent the next morning. She had had little sleep.

"You can't ignore me forever, Bella." He stepped closer until she could feel his breath, warm and sweet, on her face. Abruptly she turned away. He pulled her around with a gentle hand on her chin. "You may think you can pretend nothing happened between us, but eventually you'll have to face up to it, we were meant to be lovers, always were."

"Nothing much happened between us. We lay together like a pair of rutting animals, that's all." Isabella pulled away, turning to avoid his penetrating gaze. Hands on hips she watched Tim as he helped Agnes to prepare his morning meal of wheatcake spread with butter and honey. "You do something to me that makes me lose my commonsense, but it'll not happen again, I assure you."

Tiger sighed roughly. "That's what you said last time. Time you faced up to it same as I have, Bella. We were meant to be together." He touched her arm, but she pulled back sharply.

"Nonsense! I feel so ashamed of myself I want to scrub and scrub my body until I've got rid of every trace of you."

Tiger ran a finger down her cheek, and she jumped out of his way as if touched by a hot poker.

"You never will, Bella. I'm part of you same as you're part of me. Without the other we're nothing. Why not admit it. I have. And I'm not ashamed." He gave her a half smile.

"You don't know the word. You have no shame. How could you take advantage of me with Dougal just dead?"

"Don't be a hypocrite, Bella. Dougal hadn't been a proper husband to you in years and you know it. Perhaps he never was a proper husband. He certainly wasn't a good one. And never accuse me of

taking advantage of you. You were with me every step of the way."

"Yes, proving I'm no better than the whore you think me!" she said tightly.

"Bella!" Tiger sighed. "Let's not go over the same boring path again and again. I gave up thinking that of you long ago. You're my woman, always have been, so just own up to it." Tiger grasped her upper arms and she struggled until he freed her.

"Never!"

"Now that's a long time." He glanced about. The wagons were almost ready to move, everybody watching the two of them with interest. "We can't talk with this mob eyeing us. We'll sort this out later."

"There's nothing to sort out. Will you never learn? You gave up all rights to me on the day you let me wed Dougal. Just leave me be!"

Isabella went to get some tea and damper. Thelma gave her a look that said she knew exactly what had gone between her and Tiger last night, but said not a word about it.

"Looks like the weather's clearing up," she said instead, looking to the sky.

"Aye." Isabella nodded absently. Why did the infuriating man have to set her emotions on such a seesaw? Only a fool would believe him when he said he'd faced up to his feelings for her. No, it would be better for her by far to imagine their passionate loving last night had been brought on by his need to slake his lust on any woman.

There was no time for talking the rest of the day or the next as they went up and down steep hills that seemed never ending, the going so slow they managed only about eight miles each day. Everyone was so worn out at nightfall that once the food was eaten they all went off to their tents to sleep.

Isabella made certain she wasn't alone with Tiger for a moment and scurried to the tent she shared with Agnes and Tim when she saw him eyeing her.

They began to climb what Tiger assured them was the last hill. It was so steep and long that it took hours to get to the top, the horses having to help the bullocks once again. How this trip would have been managed without them Isabella did not know. More small trees were lopped to wedge beneath the back wheels as they'd done before to prevent the drays and wagons from sliding backwards.

The view when they reached the top made everyone gasp in awe.

"Now, wasn't it worth it?" Tiger asked as he gazed at the vista before them, the light of the conqueror filling his eyes. "This is the Sidmouth Valley. Have you ever seen such beautiful country?"

Isabella had to admit she hadn't. Lush pastures stretched to the horizon, shimmering green after the rains, with more hills in the distance, trees marching up their slopes.

But instead of telling him what she thought, she asked, "When will this awful journey be over?" She was sick to her bones of the jolting and wearisome hours spent on the wagon. They'd been on the road for eighteen days.

"Not long now. Our journey over the mountains is over, Bella. Soon we'll be on our land. Imagine it!"

He gave her one of those beguiling smiles that always managed to send her insides into a spin. But she refused to let him see how he affected her.

"Your land. Mine is further on."

"Our land," he repeated before he rode off.

She shrugged. Let him pretend she would stay with him if he so wished, but her mind was made up. The land was Tim's now that Dougal and Dougie were gone. She would work it if she died in the attempt, ensuring Tim's future.

"Beautiful country!" she said scornfully to Johnny a short time later when they reached the foot of the incline into the valley and met a swamp they had to cross to reach a place where they could rest up. The bullocks struggled through the morass, and flying insects plagued the humans. As Isabella wiped sweat from her face she called Tiger Carstairs every bad name she could summon up for dragging them here.

Then they went up and down so many hills that their bones began to feel as if they would break with the jolting.

But at last they came to country where the tree-covered hills sloped gently. They went over the plains that had been named after Governor Macquarie, before crossing the Fish River and onto the Plains of Bathurst.

It rained again and had turned cold. Isabella shivered as she pulled her coat about her.

"Soon be all over, missus, then we'll laugh when we remember all the trouble we had," Johnny said, grinning.

"Something tells me that our troubles have only just begun, Johnny," she argued as they neared Bathurst. "At least we had a roof

over our heads back in Sydney. We'll be living in those blessed tents until a house is built. I'm sick to death of living like a shepherd."

"Chin up, missus. It's gonna be a good life once the boss gets it all sorted out, you'll see."

Johnny had immeasurable faith in Tiger. Isabella pursed her lips. Yes, Tiger would sort it all out. Didn't he solve all their problems?

Sweet heavens, but didn't he make more for her as well.

Disappointment filled Isabella. The township of Bathurst was nonexistent. The townsite had been inaugurated in 1815 but so far had not been surveyed.

"So, we'll be the only ones here, apart from the ten who were given grants back in 1818," she said when her first shock had waned.

"No, Bella, of course we won't," Tiger insisted. "Cox got a grant for building the road, and there's Thomas and Elizabeth Hawkins who came over last year. He took charge of the commissariat. George Ranken, I heard, has just finished building his home on his two thousand acre grant. These folk will be our neighbours. Once we get settled in they'll be only too glad to have us visit them."

"It sounds quite crowded!"

Tiger grunted at her sarcasm.

While they made camp for the night he crossed the Macquarie River to report their arrival to the Commandant.

His eagerness when he returned was palpable as he strode back and forth. A flame burned in his eyes that was far brighter than the fire. Long after Isabella had gone to her tent she heard him pacing about.

At daybreak he urged the men to get the horses and bullocks into harness so they could be on their way.

"There, that's my grant." Tiger's voice was filled with pride when they stopped at the boundary of his land.

Studying the map once again, he nodded, breathing in deeply as he looked about him. "Have you ever seen such fertile pasture, Bella?"

Lush meadows stretched before them, a fresh and verdant carpet. Along the horizon behind them the mountains shimmered in their haze of

blue. Isabella found it hard to believe they had crossed their mighty heights. If not for this proud and stubborn man it would have been impossible.

Tiger dismounted, reverently patting the smooth silvery trunk of a ghostly eucalyptus tree. He bent to run his fingers through the grass, seeming to savour its feel as if praising the Lord for the good fortune that had brought him here.

"We'll build up yonder, away from the river flats," he declared, grinning up at her as he gestured to a plateau on a gently rising slope. "Then we need not fear that the river will flood us when it runs high. Right, we'll make camp there." He pointed to a rise. "It's not too far from the river to make hard work of carrying water. I'll dig you a well, Bella, as soon as we get settled."

Her heart dropped; she would remind him later that she had no intention of staying with him long enough for that eventuality.

The men set to straight away erecting the tents, unloading the drays and wagons. Fortunately the weather stayed fine while temporary shelters were built to store the provisions.

Two days later the teamsters left with their bullocks and drays to return to Sydney.

There was a shortage of heavy timber within easy reach. Undaunted, Tiger had the men cutting slabs of sod and turf for the walls of the huts they built. Reeds grew in abundance along the banks of the river. These were used for thatching the roofs.

Every hour was filled with activity and the days sped by. By sundown each day everyone was exhausted. Isabella retreated at nightfall to the hut she shared with Agnes and Tim. And kept out of Tiger's way as much as possible.

CHAPTER THIRTY -ONE

By the time the first land was cleared to plant crops Isabella knew for certain she was pregnant. They had celebrated Christmas and just started the New Year of 1824.

"Oh Thelma, what a fool I am," she bemoaned to her friend. "Why do I let him do this to me?"

"Perhaps God intended it," Thelma said, unsurprised by the news, it seemed. "A new life to take the place of the little one you lost. You need a baby to care for, Bella. You've only been half alive since little Dougie went."

Isabella knew that was true. The only time she'd been truly alive was in Tiger's arms.

Tiger was hard at work with the men each day, clearing land, planting crops, overseeing the care of the flock and herd. The cows they'd brought with them were in calf, and he planned to buy a stud bull so he could start building a dairy herd. So, it wasn't until one day near April that he noticed Isabella's changing shape.

"My God, you're with child," he exclaimed in a rare moment when they were alone. Grasping her shoulders he stared at her, demanding, "Bella, why didn't you tell me?"

"It has nothing to do with you!" Fidgeting, she tried to get away, but he just tightened his hold, shaking her gently. "I intend to take Tim and be off to my own place just as soon as you can spare some of the men to come along with me."

"Nothing to do with me!" He swore fluently. "What is the matter with you, woman? 'Tis mine and it will stay where it belongs, same as you will."

"Oh no I will not! You don't own me any more, as I pointed out before. I will go off as Dougal and I intended. I'll need to stay here until the baby's born for I need Thelma's help, but then I'm going, Tiger, and you'll not stop me." Tossing her head she scowled down at her bonnet when it fell to the ground.

"We'll see about that! Why do you fight me all the time? Ye gods! You're a thorn in my side, that's what you are."

"In that case you won't mind seeing the back of me."

Isabella glanced at him then quickly looked away. His chest was bare and streaked with sweat. With so much heavy labour his body was more powerful than ever, his muscles well honed and his skin tanned. The golden hairs on his chest glistened. Isabella licked her lips as she tried to conceal the emotions that forever sizzled inside her when he was near.

Tiger saw the small movement of her tongue over her lips and stifled another groan. She was driving him mad with wanting her. The woman wouldn't let him within ten feet most of the time. Being so close to her and not being able to take her in his arms was a kind of torture. He should just ignore her arguments and take her to his bed regardless of what she thought.

She wanted him, he knew it. Damn her pride, and damn himself for making her like this.

"You'll not get any men to go with you. They have no wish to set out again to start building when they're comfortably settled here. And I wouldn't allow them to go with you anyway. The convicts have no say in it and the free men are happy where they are. Agnes is the only one who's likely to want to go with you, and the two of you can hardly set out on your own. Tim stays with me, and the new baby's mine too. So that settles it. Unless you want to go alone, just you and Agnes after this one's born, then you're free to go."

"Damnation on you, Tiger! I'll go, and I'll take Tim, just you see if I don't."

Tiger grinned. "I'll come after you," he said calmly. "And if you take a horse I'll have you arrested for thievery."

"Out here? You're daft! Who's to know what I do? And who will care? I have the right to go and you can't stop me!"

"Can't I? You've only got a ticket of leave, in case you forgot. That means that until your seven year sentence is up in '25, you still have to be accountable to me, your master." He grinned, loving the flush of indignation that coloured her cheeks. "Face it, you're stuck with me."

Isabella felt like screaming at his arrogance. "Other women have started out on their own. I'll do it too. What about Margaret Catchpole? She was left to manage a property when she was still a convict. And Elizabeth Macarthur managed her husband's property for years on end while he was away." Her eyes narrowed. "And what about Eliza Walsh who had a farm at Richmond Hill with a herd of cattle and other stock!" Planting her hands on her hips she eyed him defiantly.

"Think you know it all, don't you? Ah, Bella, give over. They went

to established farms near Sydney Town. We are all on our own way out here, dependent on each other with no help from the town. We'll only survive if we stay together. You'd never get by without men to help you. You don't really want to go, why not admit you're just being awkward to upset me. Anyway, there's Thelma to consider. She needs you. She's getting so sick I fear for her. I wonder if we shouldn't have left her back yonder where she could have a doctor's care." His gaze went to the mountains in the distance.

That was the deciding factor for Isabella. Tiger was always right, infuriating man.

"Stay with me, Bella" he said softly, his eyes caressing her. "One day soon I'll build us and our children a fine house wherever you decide."

Isabella bit down on her bottom lip. "And what happens when you tire of me, Tiger, eh? What will happen to me then?"

"'Tis doubtful I ever will, Bella. Who knows what the future holds for us." He turned from her steady gaze. "We can only take each day a step at a time."

"Oh, how I wish I'd been born a man. You have it all ways."

"You think we have it so grand? We have to live with the whims and fancies of you womenfolk. We spend our whole lives digging and planting and slaving over the land for your sakes and all you reward us with is the pleasures of your body on the few occasions when you see fit to grant us our desires."

"Huh! 'Tis not why you slave over your land and you know it, Tiger. You're besotted by your acres. I swear you care more for your land than you care for me."

"That's not true. Believe it or not. When you stand here and look about you, and see this magnificent country and know that the work you put into it, the toil and sweat, will pass on for generations to come, you can't help but be smitten. One day this will be a great land. Men will go further and further west, south, north and east, forging a path that will make this a country that will be everything that's fine in mankind. I wish I could live forever to see the fruits of our labour. And just think on it, you and I and the likes of us, common prisoners of the British Government, are the forerunners. Can't you see it, Bella? Our Tim will grow up without knowing what it's like to have to grovel in the mud for a scrap of food from some rich man's leavings. He'll grow strong and fit, confident in his own worth. And all because of us."

Tiger sighed, glancing down at her belly. "And the new life growing inside you needs a father. So, let's have no more talk of you going off. This is where you belong."

Isabella pressed her lips together. Her mind was made up, and nothing he said would change it now.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

JULY 1824

Isabella stood beside Thelma's low bed, glancing at the sod walls of the hut as she ran a hand over her neck. "Do you feel up to coming outside?" she asked softly. "How would you like to sit in the garden, eh? 'Tis stuffy in here."

There was barely enough room to stand up straight, and the ceiling seemed to press down. The huts were so gloomy and stifling that everyone spent as much time as possible in the outdoors. Except during a downpour.

"Not just now, dear." Thelma gave her a wan smile. "Perhaps after I've had a doze I'll sit out there for a while, for 'tis a lovely garden, Bella." Thelma's watery eyes went to the small window opening. Isabella knew she was unable to see the garden which already flourished. "Come next spring we'll have all sorts of flowers blooming and fruit growing. We'll be able to walk along and pick whatever takes our fancy."

"Aye, Thelma, that's a fact." Isabella's voice cracked as she gently squeezed Thelma's fragile hand.

They both knew it was unlikely Thelma would see another spring, let alone the flowers and fruit.

"Promise me something, Bella," Thelma whispered, gasping to catch her breath as another bout of coughing racked her frail frame.

"If I can, love," Isabella agreed. The awful constriction in her throat almost choked her. How would she live without this woman who'd become the best friend she'd ever had or hoped to have?

"Stay with Tiger."

"I don't think I can do that, Thelma." Isabella shook her head and Thelma clicked her tongue.

"The man's as proud and stubborn as you. You're a pair well suited. He'll never give an inch, and you won't budge once you're set on a path. But he cares for you more than any of those other women back in Sydney Town, and I'm certain he's been faithful to you for quite a while, Bella."

Isabella laughed weakly, running a thumb over the almost transparent skin of the hand cradled in hers. "Oh, Thelma, don't make

me laugh! He's only been faithful since we left town because there's no one here for him except Lily, and he wouldn't sully his hands on her. He wouldn't look at me with lust in his eyes if there were other women hereabouts he could get to warm his bed, and you know it!"

"That's not true, Bella." Thelma shook her head, then dragged in a long breath, her body shaking while she tried to get enough air into her lungs.

"No? Then why was it that he never so much as looked my way for years back in Sydney, when he had his mistress to run to for satisfaction?"

"Humph! You're a sensible woman, Bella, but a bit of a dope where men are concerned. He's always looked at you with longing in his eyes."

"That's not true, Thelma," Isabella contradicted tartly. "Most of the time he looked as if he could strangle me."

"That's only because you always argued with him. He never touched you while Dougal was alive, did he?"

"No? He only seduced me on my wedding day, Thelma. If he'd left me alone I might have had a chance with Dougal. But Dougal saw us together. What man can forgive such a thing? I can't blame him for growing to despise me."

Thelma closed her eyes as she moved her head on the pillow. "That's another thing you're wrong about. Dougal was just eaten up with jealousy, he never hated you."

"Ah well, too late now for crying over what can't be changed."

Thelma dragged in air, her chest making wheezing sounds that frightened Isabella. She looked so pale and shrunken, a shell of her former self. When her hand went slack in hers Isabella thought she must be sleeping. Quietly she went to the doorway and was about to go out when Thelma said something. She went back.

"What is it?" she asked, brushing strands of damp grey hair back from the pain-ravaged face.

"I think you . . ." Thelma paused to catch her breath. "You should fetch Ginger." She lifted a hand an inch off the bedcover and Isabella clutched it gently. "Sorry I won't be here to see this little one," she said, so low that Isabella had to bend to hear the words.

A shaft of pain sliced through Isabella, making her tremble. "Don't talk daft," she chided. "I need you to help me, Thelma. You can't think of not being around for me." Tears began to stream down her cheeks. She brushed at them absently.

Thelma gave a ghost of a smile, then closed her eyes again. Her breathing had become laboured, as if she fought for each breath she took.

"I'll be just a minute." Isabella dashed from the hut, calling Agnes.

The girl came at a run, wiping her hands on her apron, Tim trailing her.

"Fetch Ginger, an' tell him to hurry, for God's sake!"

The girl's face went pale and her mouth dropped open. "Aye, missus."

Isabella twisted her hands together as she watched Agnes race off, her skirts hitched high.

"What's wrong?" Tim clutched at Isabella's hand, staring at her tear-streaked face. His lower lip trembled.

Isabella bent to cup his small chin in a palm, her enormous belly getting in the way. "'Tis Thelma, Tim, she's mighty sick. I want you to be very quiet and not upset her. All right?"

"Yes, Mama," he agreed solemnly, sitting crosslegged on the ground as Isabella went back inside the hut, tears falling as she said a silent prayer that she knew would not be answered.

Ginger came within ten minutes. He'd been working near the house, expecting this call that he'd been dreading. Thelma had been getting weaker for days and although no one had mentioned it they'd all known it was only a matter of time.

An hour later Thelma slipped quietly into the endless slumber.

They laid her to rest on a gentle slope overlooking the spot where Tiger had promised to build her a brick house.

As the mournful group walked from the graveside Isabella felt the first pain. She stopped and dragged in a deep breath.

"What is it?" Tiger asked, his face drawn and his eyes full of concern.

"'Tis the baby," she whispered, curving her fingers about his arm. "It's about to be born."

"I'll never forgive you for this, Tiger Carstairs," Isabella groaned through clenched teeth as another spasm tore through her.

"Yes you will." Tiger's voice was gentle. "Ye Gods, Bella, I'm sorry for causing all this pain. I only wish there was something I could do.

God, why is that Lily so useless! All she's good for is spreading her legs for the men."

"Well, that's what you brought her here for," Isabella reminded him tartly.

"Aye, that's a fact," he agreed. "She keeps the men satisfied, and satisfied men don't hanker for the town."

"I wouldn't want her near me anyway."

"Of course not." Turning to the young girl who was hopping from foot to foot, her eyes so wide they just about filled her face, he said, "Agnes here is going to help us, aren't you, girl? Watch your missus for a minute while I go and get some more hot water."

Agnes nodded mutely, but there was little certainty in her expression as she stared down at her mistress.

Isabella watched Tiger through half-closed eyes as he left the room, his shirtsleeves rolled up and his hair in disarray. Much as she hated to admit it he still had the ability to make her heart tilt. Would this ache in her ever go away? She must be depraved. Here she was giving birth to another of his bastards, yet her heart still yearned for him.

His concern for her seemed genuine, but how was she to know if it was an act. The man had hurt her so much in the past.

Oh Thelma! How I need you!

Agnes was hare-brained and practically useless, hopping about the room as she scrunched her apron in her fingers. Tiger was the only one she could depend on.

"Any nearer?" he asked, coming back. He gently laid a palm on her swollen stomach while he stroked her forehead with the other. "Tim wants to see you. Can he come in for a while, eh? Just to reassure himself that I'm not doing you in?" There was a nervousness about him that she had never seen before.

"Yes," she muttered, holding on tightly to the sheet as another convulsion gripped her. "Best send him in now, before it gets near the time."

Tiger wiped Isabella's face with a wet rag, then ran a hand across his own. Sweat poured down his neck and between his shoulder blades. It was unseasonably hot for July, but he had a feeling his condition had more to do with his anxiety than the weather.

"Tim, come in for a minute and see your ma," he shouted through the open doorway. His son came running, his small round face creased with his concern. Could be he was biased, but his boy was the sturdiest,

handsomest lad he'd laid eyes on. Tiger's heart burst with pride at times when he looked at him. "Now, only for a minute, mind, and no jumping on the bed." He ruffled the long hair that reminded him of sun-ripened corn. Tim went cautiously to the bed and on his toes bent forward to place a finger on Isabella's lips.

Isabella's smile looked forced to Tiger, but her eyes were gentle as she asked, "Hello, how's my favourite son?"

"I'm the only one, silly, now our Dougie's not here any more, Mama."

Tiger saw her wince at his innocent reminder. Tim hadn't mentioned his half-brother in months. While the makeshift houses had been going up there'd been so much work to be done, and many things going on to interest a boy with boundless curiosity.

"Ah, but soon you'll have one to take his place. Or perhaps a sister. How would you like a little girl to boss around, eh?"

Tim wrinkled his nose and Tiger laughed, scuffing a fist softly over his ear.

"Don't fancy that idea much, do you?" he asked, wiping the sweat from Isabella's brow, wincing when she tried to conceal a shaft of pain. "Best go out now son. Your ma is about to produce that sister or brother." He squeezed Tim's shoulder and Tim turned to look up, his eyes alight with interest.

"Will it come out like the foal and the pups did?" he wondered, glancing down at his mother's belly and pulling a comical face. "Will it be all sticky and messy like them?"

"Sure will, Tim. Now go and keep Ginger company. He's missing Thelma and needs you to watch out for him until he's feeling better."

"All right, Tiger. See you later, Mama." Carelessly he waved, then turned and ran from the room.

"It's time, Tiger," Isabella cried through gritted teeth. "Agnes!" Her breathing laboured, she looked about for the girl.

"Yes, missus." Agnes looked like a scared rabbit as she came to stand by the bed.

"Remember what I said ..." Isabella halted to drag in another few panting breaths. "As soon as the baby's out ... and the cord has been cut . . ." Isabella bit her bottom lip hard and curled her fingers into the sheet beneath her. "You must make sure it's breathing and the mouth is clean." Isabella waited for Agnes to nod, then let out a long cry. "Tiger!"

"Aye, love, I'm here. Tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it." Tiger wanted desperately to hold her, to press her close and offer comfort in the only way he knew how, but she was clasping the bed linen like a lifeline.

In that moment Tiger had the strangest feeling. It hit him in the middle of the chest as if he'd been poleaxed. If anything happened to this woman his life would be meaningless. His hands began to shake with the knowledge that he held that life in his hands. She was depending on him as no other person ever had before. Oh, his men had followed his orders, looked to him for guidance in all matters to do with the farm and the land but no one had ever put their life entirely in his hands as she was doing now.

"If I could take away the pain I would," he whispered as she moaned loudly and tensed. Pushing the top sheet back, he ordered softly, "Put a foot on my shoulder. Come here, Agnes and take your mistress's foot on your shoulder as I'm doing. Let her push against you, hear?"

"I hear, master." The girl's face was twisted with fear, and Tiger had to admit he felt as scared as she looked. He swallowed hard. "Push, love," he ordered.

"I'm pushing, dolt!" Isabella ground out, and he grinned.

"Aye, that you are, my love," he agreed softly, watching the place between her legs for any signs of the baby.

Ye gods! How women suffered to bring new life into this world. A man took his pleasure, and at times gave it, never considering the life he might be creating. Never giving a thought to the endurance of the woman producing the fruits of that act of lust.

But it had never been only lust with Bella. With her the act itself had always brought greater pleasure by far than simply the sating of his desire. Now he looked back on it, each time had seemed the most natural thing in the world. The simplest. They'd come together as if neither could help themselves. Was that love? Could that be the fragile quality the poets were always blathering on about?

Love?

Isabella began to scream and he was soon too busy to spare a thought for such fancies.

"Did I tell you how much I hate you," she ground out.

"Aye, love, many times. An' I have to admit to understanding why. Did I ever tell you you're the most beautiful woman who ever walked the earth?"

"Oh yes, I must look a picture stretched out here ... Oh, sweet Jesus!" She screamed again as she gave a mighty heave, her foot driving into his chest. He glanced across at Agnes. The girl stared at Isabella's struggles with such terrible awe on her face he paused to wonder if it might turn her off bearing children. As much sweat poured from her face as from Bella's.

His gaze went back to Isabella and he shouted, "I can see its head, Bella! Push, sweetheart, push."

"I'm pushing! What the bloody hell do you think I'm doing here?" she shouted back, her sweat-soaked head pressing into the pillow beneath her.

"Its shoulders are out, Bella!" Tiger felt a tingle in his fingers, and his heart began to thump, as without further warning the baby slipped away from its mother, into his waiting hands.

"Sweet Jesus, Bella. It's a girl, Bella."

Tiger held the tiny infant aloft by the legs and gave a shout of laughter. "We've made a daughter!" He grinned as the newborn began to make her presence known, her small mouth opened wide, her eyes puckered as she wailed.

"She's healthy?" Isabella whispered.

"Aye, love, the bonniest babe since Tim." Stunned by the wonder of what he'd just witnessed, he breathed softly, "A beautiful daughter!"

"Let me have her. Let me see her." Isabella weakly lifted her head, her arms outstretched.

"In one moment, love, and then you'll never be parted again. Get the cloth, Agnes, and wipe the babe's face and mouth." With a finger he ensured the tiny mouth was clear.

He saw to the cord as Isabella had instructed, dabbing honey on the protruding belly button. Tiger then gently put the baby onto her mother's breast.

His eyes misted as he watched Isabella's face. Tears coursed down her cheeks, onto the baby's head as she pressed a kiss on the down covering the tiny skull, then ran her hands over the flailing legs and arms, whispering words of love as she ensured to her satisfaction her babe was fit and well.

Tiger felt a pang of jealousy, and briefly wondered at it.

"She's perfect, Tiger." Her nose wrinkled. "But the poor little wretch looks too much like her father. Take her and bathe her now, Agnes. Then wrap her in the cloth afore she catches chill. And be careful,

mind."

"I will, missus. I'll treat her as gentle as a kitten," Agnes purred, taking the small mite and cooing to her.

Later, Tiger took the afterbirth away. When he came back he changed the bed linen, then rubbed Isabella's belly to ease the bleeding.

"Comfortable?" he asked, glancing about to see if he'd put everything in order. "Is there any more I need to do?"

"Just hand me my baby," Isabella said, as he plumped two pillows behind her back.

"Here, Agnes, I'll take her now." He took the tiny swaddled babe carefully, kissing his daughter's sweet-smelling head. He couldn't hold back a joyful grin. "You can go and make your mistress some tea now, Agnes."

The girl seemed to have recovered from her nervousness. Nodding vigorously, she went out, her plain face split by a smile.

"What will you call her?" Tiger asked later as he avidly watched the baby suckling at Isabella's breast.

"Thelma's middle name was Annie. Poor Thelma always wanted a baby of her own and told me once she'd call her daughter Annie if she had one. I thought I'd call her that. What do you think?"

"Do you really care what I think about it? That'd be about the first time you've asked my thoughts about anything in a long time, Bella." He grinned as he said the words, softening the scolding. His insides melted as he touched the baby's fist where it lay on her breast.

"I consider you did your share in making her and helping with the birthing, so you should have some say in naming her." She kept her eyes on the suckling baby.

"Thelma would like that, and I think it's a grand name." Tiger swallowed against the tide of feelings engulfing him. Jesus, he was shaking like a callow youth.

"Then Annie it is." She nodded, her eyelids drooping. "We'll have to wait to get her baptised by the priest when next he comes to Bathurst."

"We could get him to marry us while we're at it." Tiger didn't know who was more surprised by the sudden announcement, her or him. Her eyes sprung open and she was staring at him open mouthed. Tiger rubbed his chin, waiting.

"You don't want to marry me, Tiger." Her soft mouth twisted wryly. "What about all those plans of yours, eh?"

Tiger sat carefully on the bed. Gently he stroked his daughter's satiny cheek, still awed by her beauty. "In case you have forgotten, I gave up those stupid plans long ago. The fair misses of Sydney balked at the idea of coming into the wilderness with me. Not that I particularly wanted any of them. 'Twas a vain and stupid idea anyway, discarded almost as soon as it was born."

"Oh, Tiger, it would have saved a lot of heartache all round if you'd felt this way long ago." Isabella put her daughter to her other breast, sighing as she settled her. "'Tis too late now."

"I don't believe that!"

"Of course you don't. Tiger Carstairs doesn't think on things at all." She pushed at his forearm. "You only thought of marrying me because you're feeling all soft after the baby's birth. Believe me, it does strange things to you, having a baby."

She smiled, looking down at the infant rapturously engaged in its first meal. "You'd want to take the first woman you lusted after to bed when you got to town." She sucked in her bottom lip and began to nibble it.

Reaching over, he put a finger on her mouth, halting the movement. "Have I looked at another woman since we left Sydney?" he asked softly.

"Ha! Likely that's because apart from Thelma, Agnes and Lily I was the only one there was to look at. You don't want me, Tiger." She put the baby to her shoulder, patting her back gently. The smile she gave him was tinged with sadness.

He shook his head. "You're wrong, Bella. I've not wanted anyone else in a long time. I realised what a foolish mistake I'd made almost as soon as I'd done it, but pride does funny things to men. I burned with jealousy when I knew Dougal was sharing your bed, and when I knew you weren't allowing him his privileges any more I was wickedly pleased. I told you before Bella, you're my woman. And believe it or not I'm your man. I don't deserve your love for the things I said to you. But I gave up long ago thinking of you as a harlot. When I thought about it sensible and wasn't driven by jealousy I realised deep down that you weren't the sort of woman who would go with men for money. And like it or not, you're tied to me in some way, same as I am to you."

"That may be the case, Tiger, but still I can't marry you. You'd soon get tired of me. I'm plain and ordinary. You need a woman who can excite you."

"You excite me more than I can say, Bella." Taking the hand that wasn't holding the baby he twined his fingers through hers. "I don't think you have a notion of how you affect me, do you? For all you've been married and borne children you're still innocent of the ways and feelings of men. Do you know why Dougal was so ill-tempered and sour towards the end? He was burning up with his desire for you. It was killing him inside to be spurned by you, to see that you cared nothing for him, yet he still worshipped you."

Isabella shook her head, but he went on, "I'm not about to say this again, Bella, but hear me, and understand this. I want you in the most basic way a man can want a woman, 'tis sure, but the feelings I have for you go much deeper. When I saw you on the dock all those years ago something inside me was drawn to you. You had a bruised and sallow face and were as scrawny as a starved kitten, yet I felt a tug in my gut that I'd never felt before. Call it what you will, but 'tis there and will not go away. So, like it or not, you'll marry me as soon as the priest gets here."

His words were said low, with a definite edge. Isabella's heart beat so fast she thought it might bounce out of her chest. The baby brought up some wind and she patted her back, her eyes on Tiger as he got up and strode to the door.

He turned and nodded, as if the matter was closed.

"Don't you dictate to me, Tiger Carstairs," she cried as he went out.

The baby whimpered, and Isabella crooned as she patted her daughter's back. "I'll not wed the damned Englishman!" she muttered, kissing their newborn's cheek. "How can I believe him?"

CHAPTER THIRTY -THREE

September 1824

"Tiger'll be as mad as a pig with a bee on its nose, Bella!"

Isabella bit her lower lip. "Don't I know it, Ginger. But I have to go. Tiger must learn that he doesn't own me anymore. I warned him that I would be going as soon as I was well enough. He took it for granted that I would stay when he said a few sweet words. How can a few words make up for all the heartache he's brought me over the years?"

Ginger sucked on his pipe, his eyes grave as he stared hard at her. "Oh girl, if only Thelma were here. She'd talk some sense into you. You can't go off into the wilderness alone. 'Tis foolish and you know it. Who will take care of you?"

"Johnny has decided to come along. And Agnes, Tim and I will sleep in tents until we get a shack built. I must go, 'tis time I stood on my own feet. I'm more than capable of looking after myself. Even if Tiger does think we all depend on him for our existence. I've found out we aren't as cut off out here as I first thought. Elizabeth Hawkins is near enough to visit. She said I can call on her any time I need help. When she visited with her mother and her four girls she said I only had to let her know and her eldest boy would come to help."

"A boy in his 'teens! You're mad, Bella. How can you think of taking a two-month-old baby off like this? Away from help." Ginger swore softly beneath his breath, a rare occurrence for him.

"What you mean, Ginger, is how can I think on taking Tim and the baby away from Tiger. Well, this is something I have to do. I need to set out on my own. Need to make a life for us on our own property."

Ginger muttered a string of words she couldn't understand. "This is no place for a woman to be on her own. You need more protection than Johnny can give you. Blast it, if I could leave the sheep I would come along with you if you insist on going ahead with this foolishness."

"Why is it that a man can go off on his own and he's thought courageous, but a woman is considered stupid when she does the same thing, I'd like to know?"

"The difference is you are thinking of going with a babe and a lad barely out of his toddling. Agnes is featherbrained and Johnny's not the

brightest."

"You don't need brains to till the land and plant a few vegetables."

"You'd best take a decent cow if you are set on this, Bella. But let me tell you I think you're doing the most foolish thing you've ever done."

"Aye, Ginger. And I've done some foolish things in my time. Having two babies by Tiger amongst the most idiotic."

She gazed down at Annie, asleep in her crib. She wouldn't change one hair on her head, or on Tim's, but that didn't alter the fact that lying with Tiger had probably been the stupidest mistake she had ever made.

"And to wait until he's gone off to town! He'll be after you as soon as he finds out. He'll fetch you back. If you're still alive after this foolishness."

"Tell him not to bother chasing after me, Ginger. It'll do no good. My mind is made up."

Isabella shivered with fear, but no one would know how scared she felt. Was she a fool for setting off into the unknown like this? Was she mad to take a wee babe? No, it would be sillier to stay and be Tiger's kept woman.

"'Tis awful far from the master's camp, missus," Agnes whined, as she came to stand beside Isabella on the knoll overlooking the river. "We could still make it back afore nightfall if we left now."

"Left now? Good heavens, Agnes, we're not going anywhere. This is our home and this is where we'll stay. And stop your whining. 'Tis bad enough listening to Tim carrying on all the time without having to put up with you. Right, let's get the tent up and then a fire started. Johnny, you go and fill the water jugs and we'll unpack."

Isabella turned to the wagon. She'd done what Tiger had warned her not to do; taken a horse. But she'd only borrowed it for pulling the wagon, which she'd also borrowed. She would get Johnny to return both once everything was unpacked. She would not be beholden to Tiger for anything. It worried her slightly just how they would get to the commissariat when the need arose, but she would cross that particular bridge when she came to it.

Tiger pulled himself out of the river, striding to where he'd left his clothes. Shivering, he quickly dried himself on a strip of linen. The river was flowing fast and the water had been freezing, but invigorating. He pushed his hair back and rubbed it a few times, then bent to pull on his boots.

Damn the woman to hell and back!

She'd done it again. Left him without so much as a word. He'd kill her one day.

He hadn't been able to believe it when he'd come back from Sydney. Ginger came racing across to him, waving his hat on high. "What is it? What's the problem, Ginger? Don't tell me we have more to worry about than that little hell cat going off with my children."

"'Tis Jones, Tiger, he's missing."

Since Thelma's passing Ginger had not been the same man; this was the liveliest he'd been in weeks.

"Missing!" Jones had followed Isabella, he just knew it. Tiger went cold at the thought. "Get someone to saddle Satan," he ordered as he pulled his clothes on hurriedly.

Jones was a maniac when he had a belly full of rum. He'd managed to get into the store one day and had thrown a fit, threatening to kill anyone who came near. And Tiger had warned Ginger to keep a close watch on him while he was away; he didn't like the way Jones followed Bella's every move with eyes that spoke clearly of lust. A man who couldn't control his lustful urges in a community of few women was bad enough, but a drunken man with those urges was a menace.

Tiger groaned. The man had been causing more trouble than he was worth. "I'll send him back to Sydney. Let's see if a few days on the treadmill will sort him out. Some men don't know when they're well off, and that's a fact."

Tiger thrust his pistol down his belt and followed Ginger to the group of huts where the men lived, the free men alongside the convicts.

"How long has he been gone?" Tiger asked one of the labourers who were standing nearby like a clutch of scared hens.

"Not long. Seems he has some grudge he wants to settle with you, Tiger. He was ranting on about it last evening. With some men their feelings only come forth when they're well into their cups."

"Where the hell did he get hold of the rum! Hunt!" Tiger yelled, and the man in charge of distributing rations to the men came forward.

"He stole it, boss. I'm sorry." Hunt shrugged and looked at his dusty boots, then over Tiger's head. "Must have broke in while we were all at the river."

Tiger swore. It was an easy enough task to break the doors down, but none of the other men had shown any inclination to go against the rules set by Tiger. They had shown him a certain grudging respect since settling here, although one or two of the men had grumbled at the minimal chance of getting a woman of their own here where the few women were out of bounds to them.

Placing Annie in her crib beside the tent Isabella dropped with a sigh onto the sawn-off log that served for a chair. "There, my currency lass, you have a nap," she told Annie softly, swatting at a flying insect with a clump of grass.

"Why do you call our Annie a Currency Lass, Mama?" Tim wondered, coming to stand near her.

Isabella smiled at her blond boy child, the pride and joy of her life. And of his father's. A sharp ache ran through her each time that she allowed her thoughts to dwell on Tiger. What would he say when he found her gone? If she knew anything he would likely say good riddance. But he would not so easily say the same for his son.

"Well now, that's what the boys and girls born here in Australia are called, it seems. And those born in England are called Sterling. 'Tis just a bit of nonsense thought up by some pay officer in the army, I heard. He was being smart – the currency pound at the time was inferior to the Sterling pound. But we both know that you and our Annie are far superior to those born in the mother country, don't we eh?"

Tim nodded, his gold flecked eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "Why do we call Sydney Town Australia now, Mama?"

"I explained that all before, Tim." She sighed on a smile. "'Tis the whole of the land is called Australia, not just Sydney and out here where we live. 'Twas thought up by the government because the colony's growing fast and those in power reckoned we needed a name for the entire continent."

"What's a continent?"

"I told you, Tim. We are on an island here, only this land is much bigger than any other island so it's called a continent. Go read about it

in your books."

"Do you think Tiger is back?" he asked, his eyes growing wistful as he patted the dog that sat at his side. "Why did we have to come out here?" he whined. "I want to be back at camp when he gets there."

Isabella bit her lip, shielding her eyes to look off to the hazy mountains in the distance. She would never admit it to anyone but she missed the tall golden man so much it was as if a part of her own body had been taken away from her.

"I told you why we came here, Tim. This is your land; yours and Annie's. One day it will be worth a lot of money, and you'll be rich."

Tiger had said he would be gone a month or more, depending on how long it took him to get all the provisions and supplies needed for the house he was building; how long to hire the labourers required.

"I miss him, Mama," Tim said, scuffing his toe in the soil moodily.

Tim missed him. Ye Gods, she never would have dreamed that she would miss him this much; as if a part of her had been severed. Lord, was it always to be like this? This longing to see his beloved face. Was she forever cursed to lie in her bed each night longing for the gratification only his body could provide; long for his touch and his kisses? He was like some disease that she couldn't shake off.

Any number of awful things could have happened to him, out there in the mountains where it was like another world; a world where men changed.

"Do you think he'll fetch us back something special, Mama?" Tim brightened, interrupting her feverish thoughts.

"I hope he fetches you some books," she said, knowing without a doubt that he would come for Tim if not for her. "I have to teach you your letters and reading."

"Ugh!" Tim stuck his tongue out and made a rude noise. "What do I need to learn letters for?"

"Don't you wish to be as clever as Tiger one day? Unless you learn to read, write and count you won't know if you're being cheated, and you'll not get rich like him."

Tim grinned impishly. "Aye, I'll be as clever as him, Mama, for certain. Then I'll look after you when Tiger's not here."

"I know that, son, I can depend on you." Isabella reached out to touch his cheek, then caught sight of a movement far off over the meadows. She stood up, taking Tim's hand. A man was coming towards their camp. He stopped to speak to Johnny, who was working on the

small plot where they had a vegetable garden started.

"Who is it, Mama?" Tim asked, tugging on her skirt when she let out a gasp. The newcomer had bashed Johnny on the jaw with the pistol he carried.

Isabella went cold as she recognised Johnny's assailant. Jones! Sweet heavens, what was he doing here? She hated the man. Reaching for the pistol that Ginger had insisted she bring with her she aimed it at Jones' head.

"Agnes, come here," she called to the girl, who was stirring a pot of soup over the fire.

"Aye, missus, what's up?" Agnes saw their visitor, saw Johnny lying on the ground. "Aw, missus, what's he done to Johnny? Shall I go and help him?"

"No, stay with us," Isabella ordered, putting a hand on Tim's shoulder as Jones neared. The hand that held her weapon trembled. Lord, would she be able to use the thing if she had to? "What do you want?" she asked. Stupid question, for it was clear he was up to no good.

She glanced over to see that Johnny had scrambled to his feet and was advancing on Jones, a shovel held high, ready for attack.

"Now then, girlie, put yer weapon down. Or the girl gets it," Jones snarled, pointing his pistol at Agnes' head. Agnes screamed and Isabella's hand wavered.

"Now, you don't want to be sent up for murder, do you?" Isabella asked in a shaky voice, thinking to distract him long enough to allow Johnny time to get near.

But Jones must have ears like a cat for he sensed that Johnny was coming up behind him and with a speed that amazed Isabella leapt at her, clamping a hand around her wrist as he knocked her pistol to the ground, his own weapon now aimed at Tim's head.

Turning with more agility than she would have thought him capable of, he held her before him as a shield, and facing Johnny shouted, "Now, don't be daft, man, I just want a word with the woman here. Put the shovel down. You don't want to see the lady harmed, do you?" Bending, he pushed her gun down his belt while he held his own weapon pointed straight at Tim's head. For a moment she debated whether it was worth the risk of trying to disarm him. But then she thought better of it. The pistol could go off and any one of them would be shot. Fear for her family made her hold back. Perhaps once he took

her away from the campsite, which no doubt he would, she could find a way then to get the weapon away from him.

Filled with sickening fear she squirmed away from his rum-laden breath. Shaking her head at Johnny she told him with her eyes to keep his distance.

Why did she have to get herself involved with men like this? Was she to be plagued by his sort all her life?

"Let me go, Jones," she ordered, trying to sound assured, when inside she was quaking. "What do you hope to gain? Tiger will kill you if you harm me." She wasn't too sure of that, but his face twisted with what looked like fear, before he grinned evilly.

"Don't matter none. By then it will be too late. Keep away," he warned, when Johnny moved nearer, still wielding the shovel. "I'll use this on you, then her! After I've got what I came for." He waved the pistol about. Isabella groaned.

Johnny looked appealingly at Isabella before letting the shovel drop to his side. "What you hope to gain by this foolishness?" he asked.

"You must be mad! Or blind. I think every man in our party wanted what I'm gonna get from this little lady." He brandished the pistol when Johnny and Agnes both moved towards him.

Annie began to cry and Isabella shot her a worried glance. "Pick the brat up," Jones ordered Agnes, pointing the weapon at Isabella's belly. "And you, kid, get over there with her," he shouted as Tim raised a hand with the clear intention of hitting him.

Isabella screamed, "No, Tim!"

The dog growled, its hackles rising. "And keep a hold of that bloody animal!" Jones ordered.

"Mama?" Tim cried.

Isabella nodded, trying to smile as she said in as even a voice as she could muster, "Do as he says, Tim, take the dog and go over there with Agnes and our Annie. Mama will be fine."

"Sensible lady," Jones congratulated, moving slowly backwards, the pistol held at her throat. "We'll be off, now. One false move and you get it in the gut. Understand, Johnny boy? I've got nothing to lose, have I?"

Johnny nodded, but Isabella feared he would do something silly and get himself injured. "Johnny, just do as he says." She sent him a pleading look and he nodded again.

Jones began to drag Isabella slowly towards a stand of small trees about a hundred yards from where they had pitched the tents and built

the fire. Isabella shook her head at Johnny when he bent to pick up a piece of wood.

"Now that would be daft, wouldn't it?" Jones said, also seeing what he intended. "Just you stay here like a good lad and don't follow us. I'll have the pistol handy, so I'll use it on the little lady here, have no doubt, if you interfere. You wouldn't want to see her pretty face all messed up would you?"

"Mama," Tim screamed again as they edged nearer the trees.

Isabella's mind worked extra fast. Jones could not use the weapon and do what he intended with her at one and the same time, so then she would have her chance.

"You're a dead man, Jones, why not give up now," she insisted, pressing her heels into the grass.

"In that case I may as well enjoy my last moments on this earth," he said with a chuckle that made her hair stand on end. He was right, what had he to lose?

The pistol was pressed into her side now and Isabella swallowed a groan of fear. What was she to do?

Tiger rode as if the devil himself was at his heels. All thought of punishing Bella for leaving had fled. All he could think of was what Jones would do to her given the chance. God, the foolish woman had set off with just Johnny and the silly chit Agnes. What did she expect to achieve?

He knew the answer to that. She wished to make him pay. To prove to him that she was capable of living without him. Well, that may be so, but absence had shown him that he could not live without her. She and the children were coming back with him, where they belonged.

He saw the tents at the same time as he caught sight of two people heading towards a stand of trees some short distance from the camp. Jones! And he had Bella. Urging Satan on he raced headlong for the tents, dropping to his feet before his horse had come to a standstill.

"Thank the Lord!" Johnny grasped his shirtsleeve and shook it. "Jones has a pistol, boss, I couldn't do a thing to help the missus. He's heading for the trees."

"I know, I saw them. Tim, are you all right?" Tiger pulled his son into his arms, and held him tight for a moment.

"I'm good, Tiger, but that nasty man has Mama, and our Annie keeps crying and Agnes don't know what to do." Tim wiped a fist across his nose, leaving a streak of grime behind.

Tiger put him down and turned to Agnes. "Quiet, girl," he commanded, for Agnes's snivelling made Annie cry more. "Stay down, in case Jones fires at me. All right?"

With a nod at Johnny he set off at a run towards the trees where Jones and Bella were now hidden. Crouching low he slowed down as he neared.

"Jones! What do you think to gain by this madness? Give yourself up now before this gets out of hand," he yelled, pressing himself against the silvery bark of a eucalyptus.

"Sod off! Bastard English scum." The Welshman mumbled a string of vile oaths.

"Get your drunken arse out of there now man, and let's settle this matter!" Tiger shouted. "Give up the weapon, you bloody fool. Then perhaps I might think about showing some lenience."

"Piss off!" Jones shouted back. "I don't want your sodding len . . . Lin . . . ence." His voice sounded slurred. He was obviously very drunk.

"That's up to you, man. Either way, if you don't let the mistress go and come out now you'll end up before the magistrate."

"You'll have to kill me first. What do you take me for, a bloody idiot?" Jones cackled and Tiger wiped at the sweat that had formed on his forehead. At least while he kept the man talking he could do little with Bella.

"Tiger!" she cried and then her cry was muffled as if Jones had pressed a hand over her mouth.

"Bella? Has he harmed you? Are you all right?" Tiger gripped his pistol which he had taken from his belt. If he could only get Jones to release her he might be able to take a shot at him. "Let her go, Jones, now, and you'll get off light, man."

Ye gods! He hated feeling so helpless.

A few moments went by, then the Welshman shouted, "It'd be easy for you to kill me, wouldn't it eh, Tiger bloody Carst . . . tairs? You did away with poor old Dougal, didn't you? Poor old Dougal." He mumbled some more. "Got rid of the silly bugger, nice and neat, 'cos you lusted after this lady here. We all knew you never intended to search for his body, didn't we?"

"That's not true!" Tiger sucked in a deep calming breath as he

peered around the tree then quickly ran to another when he caught sight of a flash of white about twenty yards away. "It was an accident and everyone knows I would have gone down to bring the body up." All his anguish and self-loathing returned. He still had nightmares where he saw Dougal's body being ripped apart by wild boars. Often he awoke sweating with Dougal's screams still ringing in his ears.

No one had mentioned Dougal's death since that dreadful day on the Big Hill and he presumed, hoped, it had been forgotten. Did anyone still hold him responsible?

"Think we're stupid?" Jones bawled. "There's not a man in camp who don't lust after the missus. Me along with 'em. And now I have her. And there isn't a bloody thing you can do about it."

Tiger's fists were clenched so tightly they ached. He knew that was true, but the others made do with Lily, knowing Tiger would kill them if they so much as laid one finger on Bella. Tear them limb from limb in fact. He was ready to rip Jones apart right now.

Silently he made his way in a semicircle until he was close enough to see Isabella's pale face. Jones had one arm locked about her middle. He was looking about, agitated, the pistol raised and ready to fire.

Bella's hair was a wild halo about her face. Tiger swallowed. He had to get her away from Jones, and there was only one way to do that.

"Jones!" he yelled, throwing himself at them. He barely had time to see the look of astonishment on Jones' face and the anguish flash across Bella's before Jones fired. "Drop, Bella," he shouted before he fell, rolling to one side. A sharp pain in his shoulder made him wince but he ignored it and fired at Jones in the second after she broke away from her abductor.

Jones stood there as if turned to stone for a moment, then, a look of utter disbelief on his face, he crumpled slowly to the ground.

"Tiger." Isabella stumbled across the intervening yards and fell onto her knees at Tiger's side. Sweet heaven, there was blood on his shirt. Jones had killed him. "Please, no, dear God no," she moaned, touching the back of his head as he lay still. "Tiger, get up! You can't be dead."

But he was, she knew it. His shirt was turning redder.

"I'm fine, 'tis but a scratch."

Isabella stared down at the still form lying prone before her. "Tiger?" She put a hand tentatively on his shoulder. "Please tell me you're all right."

"I'm all right." With a soft groan he turned, a hand to his head as he

gazed up at her. "As I said, 'tis but a scratch." Groaning again, he came into a sitting position, then looked over his shoulder. "Has he moved?" he asked.

"I don't know. I was looking at you, but I haven't heard anything out of him. Hopefully he's dead!"

"Bloodthirsty wench! Though I don't suppose I can blame you. Still and all, you brought it on yourself. What possessed you to go off on your own like that, woman?"

"I wasn't alone," she snapped back. "I had Johnny and Agnes with me. We were getting along very well too. Until that idiot chose to come and mess everything up!"

"Very well! My God, woman, he could have killed you!" Tiger stood up, a hand to the red stain on his shirt sleeve.

Isabella got up too, then instinctively put a hand out to assist him. She drew it back sharply when he scowled at her.

Tiger went across to Jones and knelt at his side. "He's dead," he stated flatly after he'd put a finger to the pulsepoint in his neck. He sighed heavily. "I'll have to take his body back to the barracks. I expect we'll all have to tell our story to the magistrate."

"Let me tend your wound," Isabella said softly, standing at his side.

Tiger grimaced. The wound stung like hell. Still, it could have been a lot worse. Jones might have caught him through the heart instead of the other way around.

Tiger walked towards her campsite, knowing she trailed him. Tim came at a run when he saw that Jones wasn't with them.

"Tiger, Mama," he shouted, frowning when he saw the blood on Tiger's shirt. "What's wrong, Tiger? Did he shoot you?" His lips began to tremble as Johnny and Agnes, carrying Annie, also came near to see what was wrong.

"'Tis nothing!"

"Here, sit down." Isabella pushed him onto the log. "Agnes, fetch clean rags." Biting her lip Bella watched as Tiger undid his shirt and peeled it off. She gasped, but he shook his head.

"It looks worse than it is, don't fuss," he said.

"We need warm water, Agnes. First we'll bathe it. We need spirit to cleanse the wound." She looked about as Agnes put the baby into her cradle and went into the tent. "I have none, Tiger."

"I'll see the barracks doctor when I take Jones's body across, don't fret. Just clean it up for now, and bind it. I'll have to leave straight

away."

Agnes set the bowl of heated water down at Isabella's side. As she tended the wound Tiger said quietly, "I cannot believe he brought up the subject of Dougal's death, Bella. Do you suppose the men agree with him?" The baby began to cry. "Go see to Annie, Agnes. And take Tim with you." When the girl had taken Tim out of hearing, he said, "He could be right."

"Don't be daft, Tiger"

He shook his head, wincing when she began to bind the wound, which, as he'd said, was just a scratch. "I still have bad dreams you know, Bella. I should have gone over to make sure he was dead."

"I wouldn't have let you, Tiger. Damn that fool Jones!"

For a moment Tiger looked at her silently. "That's right, isn't it?" he said then. "You held me back, Bella. I remember you told me that if I died you wouldn't want to live. Well, let me tell you, sweetheart, I feel the same about you. Come back to me, Bella. I can't live without you. And you know that you don't want to live without me."

"I can live without you, Tiger. I've proved it. We're doing nicely here, Tim and I, and with Johnny's help we've got a vegetable garden going. I had a visit from our nearest neighbours. Elizabeth Hawkins said I only have to ask for anything I need."

"Enough!" Tiger sliced a hand through the air. "No one but me will provide you and our children with anything you need. Your place is by my side. We belong together, Bella. All right, I'll admit you can manage on your own, but I cannot manage without you. Are you going to make me beg?"

"Beg? No, Tiger, I have no desire to see you grovel. It's just that I'm scared, don't you see."

"I understand, although you probably doubt that." His eyes roved over her face, filled with tenderness. "I know I behaved like a selfish and blind pig at times, but I want to make it up to you, Bella."

"'Tis best if we just forget the past now, Tiger, I made a few mistakes of my own, I admit, but yours far outweighed mine." Isabella finished the bandage and took a step back.

Tiger grasped her hand. "Does that mean you won't come back and give me a chance?" he asked, a wealth of feeling in the question.

"Did you fetch me anything back from Sydney, Tiger?" Tim interrupted them to ask impatiently.

Tiger drew his eyes from hers to look down at their son. With a hand

on Tim's head he said, "Yes, I brought you something back, son. Books and boots and lots of other things. And I brought something for your mother too. A few things in fact."

"For me?" Isabella eyed him warily. "I don't expect gifts from you, Tiger." He was staring at her with a savage kind of hunger that made her shiver with awareness.

One of his hands came up and he tapped her on the nose with a finger, then reaching into the hip pocket of his breeches he brought out a small velvet purse.

Isabella frowned as he placed it in her palm.

"Open it."

She pulled on the drawstring around the neck, and fished about inside with her fingers as he said softly, "It dawned on me that I've never actually given you a gift, Bella. Oh, I've fed and clothed you, but I wanted to get you something special. This jewellery is merely a token signifying the love I hold for you, will always have in my heart."

"Love?" Isabella whispered as she pulled out a necklace.

"Aye. Love, Bella."

Her other hand went to her throat and she made a small exclamation of surprise as she saw it was made of diamonds. A large pearl dropped from the centre front. The last time she'd seen anything so beautiful and obviously expensive had been around the plump throat of the wife of one of the gentry. "It's beautiful, Tiger."

Her eyes misted as she gazed first at him, then at the expensive piece of jewellery.

"Here, let me put it on."

He turned her about, kissing her nape as he secured the clasp, lingering over the task. Isabella felt a tremor in his fingers, one that matched hers.

"And where would I have the occasion to wear it? I can hardly see myself parading around here decked out in such splendid jewels."

"Before long there'll be many free settlers coming across to start a new life here alongside us, Bella. You'll have many times to wear it if you are beside me as my wife. What do you say eh? Don't refuse me, Bella love. We've wasted too many good years. Or perhaps I should say I've wasted them. Just one more thing." Delving into the small pocket beneath his waistband he brought out a ring that matched the necklace for brilliance, its huge centre diamond sparkling as he held it between a finger and thumb. "The necklace is for giving me Tim. And this is for our

daughter Annie."

Reaching for her left hand he pushed it onto her third finger then pressed his mouth to her knuckle.

Isabella blinked as she felt tears prickles at the back of her eyes. She moved her hand from side to side, admiring the ring while touching the necklace. Her lips trembled while her heart felt ready to burst at the depth of her love for him; a love she knew would never fade. Shaking her head, she whispered in a voice husky with unshed tears, "I don't know what to say, Tiger."

"Then say naught, my love." He touched his mouth to her knuckle again. "Except that you'll come back to me and we'll be wed as soon as possible." He turned to signal to Johnny who stood a short distance away, beside Agnes who cradled Annie in her arms. Both grinned widely. "Help your mistress to pack up camp, Johnny. I'll expect you back by nightfall."

"Oh, you will eh? I haven't agreed yet. You think to sway me with a fancy bauble or two, do you?" Isabella tried to give him a look of scorn, but it went awry.

"I'll send men back to get Jones' body. And I'll leave you to make up your mind, Mistress Isabella. A life alone out here struggling to get by. Or a life alongside me. I have to go now." He strode to Satan, mounted and rode away without a backward glance.

"Arrogant Englishman!" Isabella muttered, taking Annie from Agnes' arms.

CHAPTER THIRTY -FOUR

Isabella straightened her bonnet. He'd won again. Still and all, she had made her break. If he didn't keep to his word she would leave him again. And for good. Every person deserved at least one more chance to prove himself or herself.

Who was she trying to deceive? To stay away from Tiger was like trying to live without breathing. She saw him now standing beside one of the huts.

"Who's that man and lady with Tiger?" Tim asked, voicing her own question.

"I don't know . . . but I think it's . . . yes Tim, it's Gracie. The lady is Gracie." Standing, and feeling as excited as a child, she waved. "Gracie!"

Gracie returned her wave with exuberance. By now they were near enough for Isabella to see the young man who stood beside them.

No, it couldn't be, surely it wasn't . . .?

"Jeremy?" she whispered as the wagon rolled to a standstill and Gracie came at a near run, her arms above her head.

Tiger followed her, reaching up to help Isabella down. "Why didn't you tell me?" she asked him as Gracie reached her and they hugged each other fiercely.

"I didn't want to influence your decision."

"Let me look at you, girl," Gracie cried, easing back to stare hard at Isabella's face. "You'll do." She patted Isabella's tear streaked cheek and winked.

"Gracie! I can't believe it's really you! I have such a lot to tell you. But what are you doing here?" Isabella brushed at her face, laughing and sniffing back tears as she gripped Gracie's hand.

"Well, now." Gracie nudged her arm. "Your man 'ere tells me you're in dire need of a woman to 'elp in the kitchen of your fine new 'ouse when it's finished. I got me pardon and was a-thinking of marrying this bloke who's 'ad 'is beady eyes on me for a while." Gracie plumped up her breasts and guffawed. "But, lawdy no, I thought to meself. What do I want to be lumbered with 'im for at this late stage in me life, eh? 'E was only after a skivvy and a bedwarmer in 'is old age. So, 'ere I am."

Gracie spread her arms, waving the hand that Isabella gripped up and

down. "And look at yer fine boy." She grinned at Tim. "And I 'ear you 'ave a baby as well." She gazed fondly at Isabella. "Seems you 'ave yer 'ands full."

"Aye, Gracie, we have a bonny daughter. Wait 'til you see her. And Tim here is spoilt by everyone. He needs a firm hand like yours to pull him in line."

"Crikey, Bella, it's gonna be grand. Just the ticket!" Gracie took a look around, beaming. "This man of yours tells me you've been a bit stubborn starting out on yer own like, but looks like yer back to stay, ain't yer?" Gracie winked as she waited on Isabella's answer.

"That depends. " Isabella turned her attention then to the man who stood, his cabbage tree hat held by the brim.

"Hello Bella," he said quietly, and she stared, her mouth agape. "Don't you recognise your own brother?" His grin was wide and achingly familiar.

Isabella put her fingers to her mouth. "Jeremy! It is you." Her eyes went from his scuffed boots to the top of his head, where dark red hair curled about his smiling face. "Is it really you?"

"That's right, girl, it's me." His voice cracked as he reached for one of her hands and squeezed it. Isabella could feel the rough callused skin against her palm.

"You're all grown up," she declared, surveying the face that bore signs of hardship. His eyes were lacklustre, as if they'd seen far too much suffering. "You're so tall." His frame was large, but his skin seemed to hang on it; what she could see above his shirt and on his bared arms. He looked as if he'd been starved of sustenance over a great period of time.

"I'm twenty-two. And changed a mite since we last met, eh?" He wagged her hand up and down, smiling crookedly.

"You certainly have, Jeremy!" Isabella pulled him into her arms. More tears flowed down her cheeks as she rubbed his back, much as she'd done when he was small and she'd offered him a measure of comfort. "How did you get here? I mean, how come you're out here? How's Ma? And the other little 'uns? Oh God, it's so good to see you." With the heels of her hands she wiped at her face.

"I was sent over six months ago, Bella. Got a seven year sentence, instead of going to the hangman. Your man here – " he nodded to Tiger, who watched them cautiously – "he got me afore they could send me to the hellhole at Newcastle. I'm afraid to say I've not been a good boy,

Bella, love, and they were sending me there to work in the quarries. Tiger here found me working on the treadmill."

"Jeremy, no!"

The treadmills had been built alongside the Carter's barracks on Governor Brisbane's orders, and everyone knew that it was one of the cruelest forms of punishment. So bad that some prisoners had requested solitary confinement instead of working on the large revolving frame where they were forced to step up or fall off.

Jeremy looked at his palms. "Yes, not the best of things, Bella, but me hands are healed well now. The blisters I got from hanging on were almost as bad as the swelling in me legs. But all's well now. Your man here got me off there and assigned to him." He nodded at Tiger, his gratitude clear in his face. "On the way over he told me about you and how you've been with him from the start. I guess we're both lucky for that, eh?"

"Aye." Isabella looked at Tiger, wondering just how much he had told her brother. Turning back to Jeremy her smile faded as she asked, "And Ma?"

Jeremy's face twisted in a kind of agony, and she went cold all over, shivering. Looking at a spot over her shoulder, he shrugged. "I'm sorry, Bella, she's gone. Went last year during a real cold spell. I don't think she wanted to live without Pa anyway. And life was such a struggle; could be she's better off where she is. You wouldn't want to know how bad it got after Papa died. Ma sort of gave up and it was so awful for all of us." He rubbed his chin and blinked a few times. "She's at peace now."

Isabella slumped down onto a log, dropping her face in her hands as she took in a shuddering breath. Gracie laid a hand on her shoulder and Isabella covered it with one of her own. Tim stood at her side, a worried frown marring his fair features.

Looking up, Isabella asked quietly, "And the others? What're they doing, Jeremy?"

With a small shake of the head he said, "Thieving and struggling to live, same as we all were. Likely they'll all end up over here." He cheered up. "But that'll be grand, Bella. Then at least we'll all be together again."

"Aye, that'll be grand," she agreed. "Now then, you look as if you need a few good meals inside you. How about we see about roasting some mutton, eh, Gracie?" Isabella lifted her head to stare at Tiger. "You can see to unloading my wagon," she said, nodding at the question she

saw in his eyes.

Her gaze shifted and went across the paddock to the house taking shape higher up the ridge. The house Tiger had declared he was building for her. The men worked industriously under the watchful eye of the foreman Tiger had hired as overseer.

He now had twenty acres under wheat and sixty of Indian corn. He grew enough potatoes and other vegetables to feed his own people as well as selling some in Bathurst to the medical officers and magistrate's household and the occupants of the barracks and hospital. A windmill was under construction alongside the house so they would soon be able to grind their own flour. Already a wealthy man, Tiger was growing richer by exporting his merino wool to England.

Isabella rocked Annie's cradle gently, smiling as her daughter made a small snuffling sound. Touching a finger to the pink cheek she marvelled again at the petal softness of her baby's skin.

The others were now in their beds but Isabella had no desire to seek her own. After all that had happened this day it was useless trying to sleep. They'd sat over the meal reliving old times and catching up on a small part of the present, grateful for their good fortune while also shedding a few tears over loved ones they would never meet again.

Isabella could not believe that her mother was really gone, that she would never see her beloved face again; never hear the sweet lilting voice that had sung lullabies; helped her family to forget that their bellies were empty while ensuring their lives overflowed with love. Of course she'd felt deep inside that their farewell had been final when she'd been transported, but at least she'd had a small hope that they would be together again once her sentence was served. That hope was now dashed.

Still and all, there was little point in dwelling on things that could never be. The past was gone. She had her own family now; her children were her life. And then there was Tiger . . .

After making sure Tim was settled and asleep she drew her shawl about her shoulders. For a moment she stood smiling down on where Gracie softly snored on the makeshift pallet beneath the window. How good it was to have her dear friend with her again. Gracie would help to take away the ache of sadness left by Thelma's passing. Still not a day

went by without her thinking of Thelma and all she'd done to help her settle in this strange and seemingly hostile land.

Yes, despite all the heartache and sorrow she'd suffered, she was sure the fates had looked kindly on her that day at the wharf.

Stepping outside she breathed the fresh night air deeply into her lungs. A gentle breeze lifted tendrils of hair that had escaped the confines of the coil at her nape and she sighed as she looked to the heavens where not a single cloud marred the majesty of the stars spread out there.

She wandered to stand beside one of the almond trees, already growing strongly, that had been planted last year. Everything seemed to flourish in this rich soil. She ran a hand up its trunk in silent prayer.

"Couldn't sleep, eh?" Tiger moved out of the shadows, his quiet question making her jump. "Too much excitement for you."

As he strolled towards her, she noticed a certain alertness in his manner. The moonlight shone on his mane of gold and her breath caught in her throat as she suddenly recalled the first time she'd set eyes on him all those years ago; how she'd thought him some sort of golden god. Then she'd done her best to ignore the effect he'd had on her. But now she had no thought to deny it; what was to be gained by that? He was everything to her. Always would be.

His mouth curved in the smile that always set her heart to skipping as he stopped in front of her, hands on his hips, his stance arrogant and commanding in the way that had once set her teeth to gnashing.

"Yes, I had no thought of sleeping this night," she admitted, touching a hand to her hair. "I have so many things going round in my head. What a day! How can I ever repay you for bringing Gracie and Jeremy back with you, Tiger?" She clasped her hands in front of her, making a steeple with her first fingers. "I don't think I thanked you properly, did I?"

"You know how to do that easily enough." Stepping a pace closer until she could feel his warm breath fanning her flushed cheeks he took her hands in his.

"I do?" She lifted her brows, her heart beginning to flutter madly as his thumbs brushed over her knuckles.

He closed the gap, then drew her to his hard body, his hands firm on her waist. Directing her hands about his middle he ordered softly, "Take that prissy look off your face and kiss me."

"Prissy, am I?"

"Aye." He pinched her chin between a finger and thumb, his eyes like molten honey as he stared long and hard at her. "You're wearing the look that warns me to leave you be, yet your body welcomes me. I can feel your heart pounding as hard as mine. Can see you're wanting my kiss as much as I'm craving yours."

Isabella let out a shaky sigh as he ran a knuckle over her breast; a knuckle she noticed shook as her own limbs were trembling. He muttered something low as he embraced her, tightening his hold as his mouth met hers, hot and hard, instantly bringing her every sense alive.

She heard a soft moan as her pulses leapt, then realised it had come from her own mouth. Every part of her body was sensitive to his touch. Even her toes curled.

Sliding her arms about his shoulders she revelled in the firm strength of him, the springiness of the hair curving at his neck, the smoothness of his freshly shaven jawline, the width of his strong shoulders. Surrendering to the delight of being close to her lover again, of feeling the hardness of him and the gentleness that combined to make him all that she could ever desire, she felt as if she was floating, drifting on a sea of pleasure.

"Tiger, Tiger."

She murmured his name in a breathless whisper as his hands travelled the length of her spine to settle on her buttocks, pushing her against the familiar hardness of his body. He left her with no shred of doubt as to what effect the kiss was having on him.

"Promise me you'll never leave me again, Bella," he murmured, his voice heavy with desire as he lifted his mouth after a long time to stare down at her.

Tiger waited with baited breath for her answer. Sweet heaven, how he loved her. "Do you think I'll ever win your love again?" he asked.

Her shoulders lifted in a small shrug. "I'm not sure if this thing between us isn't more a sort of obsession that has naught to do with love, Tiger."

She was wrong, and each and every day he would prove it to her. What he felt for his land was an obsession that overrode most other passions. But he had come to learn that he wanted love, needed the love of this woman more than anything else on earth; more than his land, because land was something that could always be sought, farmed, developed. But he now understood that wherever Bella and his children lived was where his heart and soul would always be, where his home

would lie.

"Tim wants to call me Papa." He gnawed on the inside of his mouth. "You told him."

"I thought he had the right." Her eyes roved over his face.

"Thank you." Tiger touched a finger to her chin, then dragged her into his arms, kissing her until they both were having trouble drawing breath. She gave what he demanded. Oh, how sweet she was. And what a fool he'd been. But never again. He would show her that she meant everything in life to him, if it took him until his last breath.

Lifting his head a fraction he cupped her dainty chin in a palm. "You're an obstinate woman," he muttered, touching one of her flushed cheeks then running his thumb across her kiss swollen lips. "But I missed you more than you'll ever know. I missed your sharp tongue." He traced her mouth with a fingertip, his eyes growing molten as her lips parted. "Missed your beauty and your stubborn ways." His mouth met hers again, fevered. Sucking in a deep breath he groaned, "Ye Gods, I feel as if I haven't held you in a year. Next time I go to Sydney I think I'll take you with me." Bending his head he whispered at her ear, "I want you so badly I think I'm about to burst!"

Isabella's insides melted like butter in the heat as he made gentle sweeps up and down her back with his hands until she was shivering with pleasure. While nibbling her ear until she was sighing her delight he said softly, "I have one more surprise for you."

With him nuzzling at her ear and pressing tiny kisses below it on her neck he made it difficult to think. With her face pressed into his shirtfront she shivered as she inhaled the fresh clean scent that was Tiger's alone. Shaking her head, she whispered huskily, "You've done so much for me already. Just seeing Jeremy and Gracie again means everything to me. I still can't believe they're here."

Tiger cupped her chin in a palm to lift it and gazed down at her, his eyes gone serious to match his tone as he said, "The Reverend is staying at the commissariat, Bella. You can get our Annie baptised tomorrow."

She rested her hands on his lean hips as she returned his gaze, sure he had more to declare. "That's grand, Tiger, I've made her a new gown especially for the occasion."

"Good." He nodded, then sucked his top lip in, before asking, "And do you also have a suitable gown for yourself, for I told him he'd have a marriage ceremony to perform."

Isabella gasped as she drew back her head to peer up at him. "Marriage eh?" A glow began to fill her insides, starting from the region of her heart and slowly filling every part of her until even her toes started to tingle.

"Aye, marriage. I told you I would not take no for an answer when Annie was born. You have no excuse not to wed me now." He seemed to be holding onto his breath as he narrowed his eyes, his stance clearly stating that he dared her to argue with him.

"No excuses eh?" Isabella touched a finger to his brow, then ran it down his straight proud nose until it reached his bottom lip. When it rested there he bit it gently, making her feel faint with her love for him.

"Then I suppose I must marry you. I can't disappoint the reverend, can I?" A small smile played about her mouth.

"No, my sweetheart, I'll not hear your excuses any more." He shook his head, his voice growing intense as he assured her gravely, "You won't marry me because you feel 'tis what you must do out of duty, or because it pleases the reverend. You'll marry me, dear love, because you crave it as much as I. You'll wed me because of the love you hold in your heart for me." His hands on her waist tightened as if to enforce his will on her. "A love that can never surpass what I feel for you, for I love you with a depth you cannot imagine.

"You'll marry me, Bella my girl, because you want to bring more babies into this world bearing their father's name. My name. D'you hear me?" He shook her gently.

Isabella gazed at his face, his beautiful mouth, his unusual eyes, now glinting with his intent, and knew that nothing in this life would keep her from becoming his wife.

"Aye, Tiger, I hear you." Her voice shook as she stood on her toes to place a kiss on his mouth.

Tiger's warm breath sent shivers up and down her spine as he brushed his mouth over hers and whispered hoarsely, "So, my love, what's it to be then? Will you take the final step that binds us together in the name of God, as we've been bound together since the day we first laid eyes on each other?"

"If that's what you wish, master." Isabella gave him a look from beneath her lowered lids, running her fingers up and down his chest as she allowed, "Then so be it."

"Thank the Lord!" Tiger groaned, throwing his head back. "I don't think I could have borne it if you refused me again Bella, my love."

"Just don't ever give me cause to regret it, Tiger." Isabella took his face in her palms, her thumbs smoothing across his cheeks. "I'll be a jealous wife and should I ever find you even glancing at another woman with lust in your eyes I give you notice now that I'll kill you both."

"You have my permission to do just that if I ever let you down. I vow on our children's lives, sweetheart, that I'll never so much as give a thought to any woman but you for as long as we both live and then beyond to eternity."

Tiger sealed his promise with another long kiss. When he lifted his mouth from hers he lightly traced the shape of her mouth with his tongue. Desire coiled inside her as she struggled to catch her breath.

Trying to ignore the fierce tugging low in her body Isabella opened eyes that had grown heavy to watch him as he tucked a stray strand of her hair behind an ear.

"I hoped and prayed you'd see sense, Bella. If you hadn't, I was going to woo you in earnest. I nearly died when I returned to find you had run off."

Isabella put a hand over his heart to find it thumped in unison with hers. "I think our wooing has all been done Tiger, wouldn't you say?"

"No, my love, I intend to spend all my days courting you, to make up for all our wasted years. Years when I acted like a dolt of the worst kind."

"Let's not dwell on the past, Tiger. We both did things to be ashamed of. Let's not think on mistakes that can't be changed. From now on we'll simply try to make all our tomorrows the finest possible."

"Well said, love." He squeezed the hands he had enfolded in his. "Now," he murmured, tucking one of her hands into the crook of his elbow. "I think we've spent enough time lingering here beneath the stars. Let's go to our bed, love. We have a lot of lost time to make up. I find I can't wait any longer to make love to you, Bella." There was a passionate light in his eyes as he ran a finger down the bodice of her gown. "I'm tired of these garments that separate us. I want to feel your silky skin beneath my hands again. Long to have you beneath me, open, soft, generous."

The same sense of urgency filled Isabella. His soft caress made her shiver, his words heightening her own anticipation. How she yearned to feel his hands, his mouth, caressing her body, bringing it to life, stirring every sense as only he could. What a fool she'd been to think she could make a life without him.

So wrapped in her sensual thoughts was she that it took a moment for her to realise that instead of heading for his hut he was leading her up the hill and away from the cluster of huts.

"But ... where are we going?" she wondered softly.

Tiger stopped, facing her to take her lips with a gentle force that left her more breathless than ever.

When he raised his head he said earnestly, "Tonight I have a yen to sleep with my soon-to-be wife in the house that will shelter our children and us for many years to come."

Bending, he scooped her into his arms and with a soft growl whirled once with her. "The house that will watch us build a sound future, put down solid roots for them and their offspring in this land beyond the mountains with their blue haze."

"But we have no bed up there, Tiger," she reminded him huskily.

He brushed his nose on hers. "Since when has that bothered us, eh? A blanket will suffice."

Isabella linked her fingers about his neck and returned his smile, her heart filled to overflowing.

They had journeyed far since that first momentous meeting on the wharf, overcome many obstacles, but the best part of their journey lay ahead. This part would be the easiest; for now they would face it together; two hearts in unison.