

A romantic close-up of a man and a woman about to kiss. The man, on the left, has short brown hair and is wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and a dark tie. The woman, on the right, has long, wavy blonde hair and is wearing a red dress with white lace detailing at the collar and cuffs. She is also wearing a pearl earring. The background is a deep red, textured fabric. The overall mood is intimate and romantic.

LAURA MARTIN

Her Rags-to-Riches
Christmas

MILLS & BOON
HISTORICAL

Mills & Boon Historical

Laura Martin

Her Rags-To-Riches Christmas

«HarperCollins»

Martin L.

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— (Mills & Boon Historical)

A Christmas miracle rescue! But dare she wish for more? Wrongfully-convicted and transported to Australia, Alice Phillips is saved from public flogging by wealthy landowner George Fitzgerald. Working as a domestic servant at his farm feels worlds away from her old life. But as the connection between her and George boils over, she's torn between her fear of trusting anyone...and the tantalising glimpse of the fresh start this man could offer...

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LAURA MARTIN writes historical romances with an adventurous undercurrent. When not writing she spends her time working as a doctor in Cambridgeshire, where she lives with her husband. In her spare moments Laura loves to lose herself in a book, and has been known to read from cover to cover in a single day when the story is particularly gripping. She also loves to travel—especially to visit historical sites and far-flung shores.

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Her Rags-to-Riches Christmas

Laura Martin

MILLS & BOON

www.millsandboon.co.uk

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HER RAGS-TO-RICHES CHRISTMAS

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For Mum and Dad,
and that trip around Australia a decade ago.

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Chapter One

Crouching down, George Fitzgerald took a handful of earth and let it trickle through his fingers. The earth here wasn't like anywhere else in the world—and he'd stopped off in many countries during the long voyage back to Australia. It was thick and fertile and smelt of home. It felt good to be home, good to have the warmth of the sun on his face and the sound of the sea behind him. Three long years he'd been gone and now he was eager to get back to his farm, to get back to a normal life.

Sydney had changed in the time he'd been away. There were more buildings, more people, and as he walked away from the port he felt an optimism for his country that he hadn't for a long time. It was as though people had finally realised this fledgling colony was here to stay and one day might be more than just a place to send those England had sentenced to transportation.

George was just crossing the road, heading north-west to start the long and dusty journey out of Sydney and back to his farm when he heard a scream so piercing it made him stop in his tracks. Five seconds passed and then ten, then there was another cry, even more desperate than the last. Another and another passed in quick succession, each followed by a loud sob.

Quickly he ran down the street, dodging the children playing and the women bustling through the town, rounding the corner just as he heard another agonised scream. He slowed as he came up against a small crowd, gathered around watching the spectacle in front of them, muttering uneasily. This time the crack of the whip was unmistakable, coming just a fraction of a second before the woman's cry of pain.

George took in the scene. Tied to a post was a young woman, her age difficult to tell as her head was lolling forward, her face covered by thick tresses of hair. Her dress had been ripped at the back, exposing pale skin crisscrossed with the marks of the whip. Some of the lashes had broken the skin and blood dripped down in crimson droplets. The guard brandishing the whip had a serious expression on his face, but as he drew back his arm for another lash George could see he was relishing the power he held over the woman tied in front of him. She would get no mercy from that quarter.

Before the rational part of his brain could stop him, George sprang forward, parting the crowd and placing himself between the guard and the woman. He shot out a hand, grabbing the whip just before the guard could flick it, stopping it in mid-air. His hand was wrenched forward, but he managed to stand his ground, planting his feet firmly and bracing his shoulders.

For a moment the guard just looked at him with surprise.

'Move away,' he growled after a few seconds.

'She's had enough,' George said, his voice calm and his manner polite, but he knew the guard would see the steel in his eyes.

'What business is it of yours? Move away.'

'I can't do that. She's had enough,' George repeated.

With a snarl the guard yanked at the whip, trying to unbalance George and send him sprawling into the dirt, but George had a good hold on the leather now and pulled back just enough to show the guard he wasn't going to be shifted easily.

'I'll whip you, too, don't think I won't.'

George had no doubt the guard would go through with the threat in a fit of anger.

'Go fetch someone from the Governor's office,' he instructed a young lad standing at the front of the crowd. 'There'll be a coin in it for you.'

He watched as the boy scurried off, then turned his attention back to the man in front of him. The guard still hadn't moved, but every so often would pull on his whip, trying to unbalance George from a distance. He wanted to check on the woman hanging from the whipping post, but did not dare turn around and take his eye off the threat in front of him.

There was a murmuring in the crowd and out of the corner of his eye he saw people step aside as a couple more guards pushed through, coming to investigate the commotion.

Within seconds he was surrounded by four large men, doing their best to tower over his six foot two frame, but failing.

‘Gentlemen...’ George said, knowing they were nothing of the sort. ‘Please step back. Someone from the Governor’s office will be here shortly to sort this mess out, but I wouldn’t want any of you to get hurt before he arrives.’

One of the guards laughed mirthlessly. ‘Let go of the whip, or you might find you are holding on to it with a broken arm.’

George sighed, cursing the protective instinct that had pushed him to interfere. He was a good fighter and strong from years of working on the fields. He had no doubt he could land a few punches if it came to it, but he was outnumbered five to one and that meant he could expect a pretty good beating. Perhaps a black eye or two. What a welcome back home he was receiving.

Smoothly, he dropped the whip for a fraction of a second, using the guard’s surprise to unbalance him, catching hold of the leather further down and yanking forward, pulling the first guard so he crashed into the body of one of the others. Ignoring the shouts of outrage, he swung his body round, landing a couple of punches on the jaws of two of the other guards before he felt them catch up to what was happening and pile on top of him. George was buried under the bodies and fists of five men, gasping for air and wondering if this foolhardy rescue would be his last when he heard a loud voice calling for order.

Slowly the men on top of him rose, not missing the opportunity to get in one or two more sneaky jabs on the way up.

George lay on the ground, looking up at the brilliant blue sky, contemplating if the dull ache in his chest meant one of his ribs was broken. He was out of breath and he could feel a warmth on his cheek which he suspected meant his eyebrow had been split open.

‘Mr Fitzgerald, if I’m not mistaken,’ a cultured voice said. ‘Australia’s prodigal son returns.’

George looked up, seeing only a silhouette against the sun, but took the proffered hand to pull him out of the dirt.

‘Colonel Hardcastle,’ George said, recognising the man who was now the Lieutenant Governor, second only to the Governor of New South Wales in status and rank. Hardcastle had been in Australia for almost a decade and George had known him from social and bureaucratic events before he’d taken his trip to England. The Colonel was a good man, if a little eccentric.

‘Tell me, what on earth did you do to anger so many of my guards?’

‘He interfered with the execution of my duty, sir,’ the first guard rushed to say.

‘Hmm. Mr Fitzgerald?’

‘He’s not wrong,’ George said with a shake of his head. ‘If his duty was to whip this poor woman half to death.’

All eyes turned to the woman still hanging lifelessly from the post a few feet away. Colonel Hardcastle stepped over to her, lifting her head as he crouched down as if to satisfy himself she was still breathing.

‘She’s a thief, sir,’ the guard said helpfully. ‘I caught her stealing. The punishment is whipping, fifty lashes.’

‘How many lashes has she had?’ Hardcastle asked.

‘Only six, sir.’

George watched as the other man’s eyebrows raised. To rip open her back in such a fashion with just six lashes spoke of the whip being wielded with an almighty force.

‘I think she’s had enough,’ Hardcastle said. ‘Where is she working?’

‘The laundry, sir.’

Again Hardcastle looked surprised. To get a place somewhere like the laundry the woman tied to the post must have been so far a well-behaved convict. The worst jobs, mainly those in the factories, were saved for the troublemakers, the best for those who followed the rules and toed the line.

‘What did she steal?’

‘Bread, sir.’

Hardcastle crouched down in front of the woman, shaking his head in regret.

‘Well, that’ll be her post gone now. Untie her, take her to the cells.’

George knew he should stay quiet. It was only his status as one of the wealthiest local landowners that had saved him from being whipped himself, but even so he couldn’t find it in himself to keep his mouth shut.

‘I’ll take her,’ he said quietly. As soon as the words left his mouth he regretted them. He had no need for a convict worker, not a domestic at least. He always could use an extra pair of hands in the fields, but the petite woman tied to the post wasn’t going to be much help there. He was thinking with his heart again, not his head, feeling sorry for the woman who had been whipped so harshly. It was no doubt down to spending so much time away from his farm—soon he would need to start thinking like a business owner again.

‘I’ve got a need for a servant,’ Fitzgerald said. ‘I was going to put in an application, but I will take her instead. It’ll save you the trouble of punishing her further.’

Hardcastle seemed to consider the proposition for a moment, regarding Fitzgerald with his keen blue eyes. Then he shrugged. ‘If you wish. File the paperwork in the next couple of weeks.’ He turned to the guards. ‘Cut her free, Mr Fitzgerald will take her from here.’

With a slash of a knife, one of the guards cut the woman free, sending her tumbling into the dust. George could see she’d recovered from the faint, but her movements were stiff and her head still bowed. Slowly the crowd began to disperse, muttering at the odd conclusion to the day’s events. George wasn’t sure if they were disappointed there hadn’t been more violence or glad for the woman’s relatively light punishment in view of what the guard had planned for her.

‘Can you stand?’ George asked softly as he moved over and crouched down next to the woman.

He felt the air in his lungs being sucked out of him as she slowly lifted her head, fixing the bluest pair of eyes on his he’d ever seen.

Without answering she began to rise to her feet, wincing in pain as the remnants of her dress brushed against her shredded back. George reached out a hand to help her, but she stiffened at his touch, glaring at him from under her long eyelashes until he backed away.

As she rose she had to hold her dress to her body to stop it slipping down and George quickly shrugged off his jacket, placing it gently over her shoulders.

‘What’s your name?’

Ten seconds passed, then twenty. He knew she wasn’t mute after hearing her screams not ten minutes ago, but right now she didn’t look as though she would answer him.

‘I’ll not be your whore,’ she said eventually.

‘Excuse me?’

‘That’s why you saved me. So I could be your whore. I’ll not demean myself in that way.’

George had never been lost for words before in his life, but found his mouth opening and closing in surprise.

‘Thank you for your intervention, but I will take my chances at the factories.’ She began to hobble away, every step the pain evident on her face.

‘Stop,’ he called out, wondering whether to assure the young woman he hadn’t asked the Lieutenant Governor for her just so she could serve him in the bedroom, or to point out that it didn’t much matter what she wanted—she’d been assigned to his farm. ‘I think there’s been a misunderstanding.’

He could see the anxiety in her expression, the naked fear as her eyes darted over him. Alongside that there seemed to be a hint of anger, directed at him even though they'd only just met. He moved a fraction closer, spreading his hands out in front of him to try to make himself look less intimidating. 'I merely wished to employ you on my farm, nothing more.'

'Why?' she asked, still looking mistrustful, but standing her ground, her eyes narrowing.

George hesitated. In truth, he didn't know. She was nothing to him, a stranger, yet he'd risked a whipping for getting in between her and the guard's harsh but lawful punishment. And now he'd lumbered himself with a convict worker he did not need.

'Call it Christmas charity,' he said with a shrug. 'My good deed for the year.'

'It's not Christmas for another month.'

'Then I'm banking it for later.'

They stood five feet apart, both regarding the other for a long minute. Then she gave a gracious nod, as if she were a queen and George a lowly servant requesting a favour.

'You don't touch me,' she said, thrusting out her hand and stabbing a long and dainty finger in his direction.

'On my honour.'

She inclined her head once again and allowed him to guide her along the street, the most unlikely of couples.

Chapter Two

‘It doesn’t need to be anything fancy—just a shirt and trousers will do. Anything’s better than that shredded old dress.’ Alice listened to the voices outside the door for a moment before sinking fully under the water, revelling in the warmth and watching the bubbles rise to the surface in a neat little stream. It had been agony for the first few seconds in the bath, the open wounds on her back throbbing and stinging as the water came into contact with them, but she knew the importance of getting them clean. Open sores like that could fester. She’d seen more than one person’s wounds start swelling and weeping after a whipping on the transport ship on the way over to Australia and that could be fatal.

Now though, after her body had got used to the sensation of the water against her open flesh, the bath was soothing and she silently gave thanks for having the opportunity to bathe before the journey ahead.

Rising up to the surface, Alice could hear the argument still going on outside the door.

‘I’ll not dress a woman in a shirt and trousers. It’s not right. It’s not Christian.’

‘Whatever you can find,’ said the deep voice in reply. Her saviour. Mr Fitzgerald. A man with kind eyes, eyes that it would be all too easy to trust. Alice snorted—she wouldn’t be trusting him any time soon.

With a sigh, she rose up out of the water, letting it drip from her body before she stepped out of the bath. She grabbed the towel from where it had been hung within easy reach and began to pat down her body, grimacing as she laid the soft material against her back. Six lashes, that was all she’d had, and the guard had made sure every single one would leave a scar. He’d ripped open her back with the first lash and continued the damage with the next five. It wasn’t the first time she’d been whipped, but it was the most painful.

Alice heard the door click open and the landlady slipped in, brandishing a dress that was going to be much too large. Her own coarse grey sack of a dress lay shredded on the chair, stained with her blood and ripped past repair. However, looking at the garment the woman was holding in her hand, Alice wasn’t sure this would be much better.

‘It’s a little large, my dear,’ the woman said, her deep Yorkshire accent making Alice think of home. ‘But it’ll protect your modesty well enough. Now let’s have a look at that back of yours.’

With a series of tuts and sighs the landlady helped her dress, leaving the material loose at the back so it wouldn’t stick to the open wounds. Alice peered in the steamed-up mirror, noting the wet strands of hair hanging around her face, the pink skin on her sunburned nose and the freckles that had appeared on her cheeks these last few months. The dress hung off her, inches too long at the bottom and sitting all wrong around her hips. She looked like a child playing dress-up in her mother’s clothing.

‘You’ll do, child,’ the landlady said, looking at her with her hands on her hips. ‘I’m sure Mr Fitzgerald will sort you out with something that fits once he gets you home.’

Home. The very word sent a slither of dread into her core. *This* was exactly what she’d been avoiding for the nine months she’d been in Australia. Most of the other women she’d been transported with, and many who’d arrived after her, were settled with a man by now. Either the free-men, landowners, workers—any of the men who had the right to select a convict woman to be theirs, as a wife or something more lurid—or with other convicts, men who promised to look after them in this frightening new life.

Alice had resisted both. Her life was little enough her own as it was, she didn’t want a man controlling what few choices she did have. She’d made that mistake in England, saddled herself with a man who’d promised her the world, slowly reduced her to a shadow of her former self, then led her into the situation that had resulted in her arrest and transportation.

Now it would seem that she didn't have a choice. Of course she was grateful to Mr Fitzgerald for stepping in when he did, but what would be the price?

'Come, dear, he's waiting for you. Eager to get back home, I would think.'

Alice smiled weakly, allowing the landlady to usher her out of the room. Mr Fitzgerald had insisted she get cleaned up and a change of clothes before they headed for wherever it was he lived. Alice was grateful; she felt much more human now she'd washed the blood from her back and the dirt from her hands.

As she descended the stairs she saw him sitting in the corner of the tavern, feet up on a stool and hands behind his head. There was no one else in the room, it being so early in the day, but even if there had been he would have commanded attention. He was a tall man, with broad shoulders and strong arms. Arms that hadn't hesitated in defending her.

She saw the moment he noticed her, watched the flicker of amusement in his eyes as he took in the dress made for a woman three times her size. Suddenly she felt self-conscious. She looked a state with her sunburned skin and her loose and tousled hair, but then she rallied. Perhaps he would be less inclined to force her into his bed if she continued to look quite so unattractive. For a moment Alice wondered if she was being uncharitable with her suspicions, but she couldn't help it. Time and time again since her sentencing men had tried to take advantage of her—she couldn't trust Mr Fitzgerald even if he had been kind to her.

'Are you feeling fit enough to travel?' he asked, standing. His movements were lithe and fluid, despite his size, and Alice was surprised to find him in front of her before she could blink.

'Yes, sir,' she said, looking at the ground. She was in a fix, there was no denying it. It would be foolish to run off here, with so many guards patrolling the city overseeing the work gangs of convicts. One shout from the man in front of her and she'd be dragged back to the whipping post. Still, the idea of leaving everything she'd known for the past nine months behind made her feel queasy.

'After you.' He took a step back and extended his arm, inviting her to go ahead of him. Alice blinked a couple of times, unused to anyone displaying manners like this, then stepped forward.

'I'll call in next week and settle the bill,' Mr Fitzgerald called over his shoulder to the landlady. She nodded graciously and Alice wondered what kind of influence he must have if he could walk away with just the promise of payment some time in the future.

Outside there was a cart, loaded up with a couple of large trunks and space up front for two. Mr Fitzgerald paused in front of it, holding out his hand to help her up. Alice brushed past him, ignoring the hand, and hauled herself up on to the seat. Once she was settled she squeezed herself over as far as she could go, but the seat was small and as he climbed up his body brushed against hers. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying not to let the panic of being in such close proximity to someone overwhelm her.

'Comfortable?' he asked, looking at her shrewdly.

'Does it matter?' she asked, trying to focus on the road in front of them rather than the man sitting next to her.

Mr Fitzgerald shrugged, seemingly unperturbed by her brusqueness.

They set off through the streets of Sydney, heading west at a sedate pace. The sun was high in the sky even though it was still an hour or two before midday and it beat down relentlessly. If their journey lasted any longer than half an hour no doubt she would turn pink on any exposed bits of skin. She'd been in Australia for a few months shy of a year now, but this was the hottest month yet. In England at the end of November they would be getting ready for snow, but here the temperatures just kept creeping up. It would be strange to have Christmas in the sweltering heat rather than the dull coldness of a December in England.

'Will you tell me your name?' he asked quietly, his eyes fixed on the road ahead of them.

'Alice,' she offered. 'Alice Fillips.'

‘Tell me about yourself, Alice,’ Mr Fitzgerald said as they made their way out of Sydney. The road ahead was dusty but clear and he had relaxed back into the seat next to her, holding the reins casually in one hand.

She looked at him, her eyes narrowed. Although many of the men she’d met on the transport ship and since arriving in Australia weren’t this subtle, there had been a couple. A couple of men who’d tried to trick her with kindness, to make her let down her guard so they could slip in and take advantage.

‘What would you like to know, sir?’ she asked, her voice flat.

‘Do I detect a Yorkshire accent?’ he asked after a moment.

‘Yes, sir. I grew up in Yorkshire, just outside of Whitby. I moved to London when I was sixteen.’ She kept her answer short, her voice terse, trying to discourage any more questions.

For a moment she felt a pang of homesickness, not for the crowded streets of the capital where she’d spent her years as an adult, but for the carefree life she’d left behind in Whitby. At the time the rolling Yorkshire countryside had seemed dull and Alice had been eager for any opportunity to get away; now she would give almost anything to be back there safely with her sisters.

‘And how long have you been in Australia?’ he asked, glancing over at her. Alice shifted. Of course he would want to know about her crime. Whatever his motivation was for rescuing her from the whip and taking her into his home, he would want to know what kind of woman he’d taken on.

‘Nine months,’ she said. ‘I spent a year of my sentence in gaol in England, then nearly a year on board the transport ship. I have just over two years left to serve.’

He nodded and Alice waited for the inevitable query as to her crime. The seconds ticked past and it didn’t come. Mr Fitzgerald was just sitting there, surveying the road ahead, and by the expression on his face he couldn’t care less what she’d been convicted of.

‘Don’t you want to know what I did, sir?’ she asked, her tone challenging.

He shrugged. ‘If you want to tell me.’

She frowned. Everyone wanted to know what crimes had brought people to this country: the woman she’d worked for in the laundry, the stern couple who’d provided her lodgings. It was expected that she divulge her crime over and over again and now this man didn’t seem overly bothered by what she’d done. It was unsettling.

‘You’re taking me to your home, but you don’t want to know what crime I committed?’ she asked eventually. It felt wrong, suspicious.

He looked at her, a smile fighting to gain control of his lips. ‘Five years,’ he said with a shrug. ‘If they only sentenced you to five years, it couldn’t have been anything too terrible.’

It was true the murderers and the violent criminals weren’t often the ones who found themselves aboard the transport ships to the other side of the world, and especially not for a mere five-year sentence. Most of Alice’s fellow convicts were thieves, pickpockets or men who’d stolen from their masters or forged documents. They still could be violent and cruel, but the crimes were not often the most heinous.

‘I like Yorkshire,’ Mr Fitzgerald said after a few minutes’ silence. ‘Very dramatic scenery. The moors, the cliffs.’

‘You’ve been?’ Alice cursed herself for the instinctive question. The last thing she wanted to do was encourage conversation. She wasn’t even sure why she was surprised. Most people in Australia hadn’t been born there. The man next to her could have started life anywhere in England.

‘Recently. I’ve just got back from my very first visit to England. I travelled a lot—given the distance, it might have been my only opportunity.’

It felt strange to be sitting next to this man making small talk. Although she wasn’t a slave and had some rights, she had been given to him as a convict worker, required to follow his rules and do what he said or risk the harsh punishments dealt out to those convicts not seen to be toeing the line.

Still, she could use the opportunity to get some information on the man who'd rescued her. It always paid to know those you were forced to be close to.

'You sailed to England?' she asked, feeling her heart hammering in her chest. It seemed impossible—although ships did leave for England, no one she knew had ever been aboard one. Probably some of the guards went home after their stint in Australia was up, but even most of those chose to stay and make a life for themselves in the colony. And the convicts... Well, everyone dreamed of going home, but a passage was far too expensive. That was the harshest part of the sentence they'd received for their crimes. Five years in prison for theft was one thing if your family and friends were waiting for you when you were released, but once you'd been transported to the other side of the world it was likely you'd never make it home again.

'I did. I'd only just disembarked the ship this morning when I heard you screaming.'

Alice shifted uncomfortably in her seat. The wounds on her back were throbbing and as the temperature rose little beads of sweat were forming and trickling down into them, making the pain worse.

'But you said it was your first visit to England?'

'It was. I was born here. My parents made the journey while my mother was pregnant.'

'But they weren't...' Alice hesitated—most people settled in Australia were ex-convicts or guards, but a few families had decided to make the colony their home out of choice '...convicts?'

Mr Fitzgerald laughed and Alice saw the way his eyes crinkled, the flash of white teeth and something tightened inside her. Pushing away the feeling, she looked down at her hands, focusing on the chapped skin, cracked from all the time spent working in the laundry.

'No, not convicts, just dreamers,' he said fondly. 'My father believed Australia to be the land of opportunity and for him it was true.' He paused, looking at her with a broad smile. 'You're very adept at that,' he said.

'At what?'

'Deflection. I still know next to nothing about you.'

Alice hadn't even realised she'd done it. Keeping as much of herself private as possible had become second nature to her over the past few years. The less people knew about you, the less ammunition they had to hurt you with.

She opened her mouth to answer, but was cut off by Mr Fitzgerald pulling on the reins and abruptly jumping down off the cart. She peered after him, trying to work out what had made him stop so suddenly. Inside her chest she could feel her heart hammering and a coil of icy dread snaking through her stomach.

'What are you doing?' she asked, her voice shrill.

'Come here,' Mr Fitzgerald said quietly.

She glanced at the reins, wondering how far she would get if she grabbed them and rode off. There was no reason for Mr Fitzgerald to stop the cart out here in the middle of nowhere. No *good* reason.

Alice shuddered as she remembered the men on the transport ship, the arms holding her down, the warm breath on her neck. She would never let another man have the opportunity to attack her again, even if it meant committing another crime to get out of the situation.

Mr Fitzgerald glanced back at her, frowning slightly, but then turned away again, his attention focused on something at the side of the road. Alice hesitated. It could be a ploy, a way to distract her, but as he moved to one side she saw him crouch down next to something brown and furry.

Carefully, trying not to open the wounds on her back any more, Alice stood and climbed down from the cart, too, crossing to where Mr Fitzgerald had knelt down by the side of the road. They'd left Sydney behind them and were now on a dusty road winding through farmland on the Sydney plain. It was the furthest Alice had been from the city since her arrival in Australia and as she walked across the road she was struck with the beauty of the land sprawling out in front of her.

‘She’s injured,’ Mr Fitzgerald said as Alice crouched down beside him. ‘Looks like the work of a dingo.’

‘A dingo?’

‘Large native dog. They’re a pest to livestock, vicious, too, and they love kangaroo meat.’

Peering over his shoulder, Alice saw the kangaroo. It was large and would have been almost comical looking if it wasn’t for the blood matted in its fur. She could see it wasn’t breathing, there had been no movement since they’d hopped down from the cart, and she wondered what exactly Mr Fitzgerald was hoping to achieve by stopping.

‘Come here, little one,’ he murmured, leaning forward and lifting a brown little bundle out from the kangaroo’s pouch.

‘A baby?’ Alice asked in surprise.

Mr Fitzgerald nodded, handling the small animal with care as he stroked its furry little head.

‘It’s all right,’ he murmured. ‘I’ve got you. We’ll keep you safe.’

Alice watched as he stood and shrugged off his jacket, wrapping the baby kangaroo in it before holding the bundle out to her.

‘I c-can’t...’ she stammered.

‘Of course you can. I’ve got to drive the cart.’

‘What if I hurt it?’

‘Did you have any animals growing up?’ he asked.

Nodding, she remembered the beautiful collie her older sister had brought home one day. ‘A dog.’

‘And did that dog ever have puppies?’

‘A couple of litters.’

‘Think of this just like a puppy. He just needs a little love and attention, handle him carefully but he is a sturdy little joey.’

Alice reached out and took the little animal, feeling its warmth through the fabric of Mr Fitzgerald’s jacket. Carefully she set it on her lap once she’d climbed back aboard the cart and gently stroked its fur. At first she could feel him trembling, but after a few seconds the kangaroo seemed to relax under her touch and snuggled in deeper on her lap.

‘Time to go home,’ Mr Fitzgerald said, urging the horse forward. His hand brushed against her thigh as he rested the reins down and Alice stiffened. She glared at him, trying to work out if it had been deliberate or not, but he seemed oblivious, staring out into the distance as if he were soaking up the view for the first time.

Chapter Three

‘Mr Fitzgerald,’ Mrs Peterson’s delighted voice called out from the doorway of his house and George could see the older woman had to hold herself back to stop running to embrace him.

‘You are a sight for travel-weary eyes, Mrs Peterson. I am glad to be home.’

‘We’ve missed you, sir. We’ve missed you sorely.’

George hopped down from the cart just as the lumbering form of Mr Peterson rounded the corner, a bright smile lighting up his face.

‘You should have sent word. I’d have been at the docks to meet you if I’d known you were coming.’

The couple had been convict workers assigned to his father’s farm many years ago. They’d served out their sentences, found companionship in one another, and stayed on as live-in servants for well over twenty years. When George’s parents had passed away, there had been no question of the Petersons going elsewhere, and for the past eight years they had looked after his home and him with devotion.

‘You know what these ships are like, there’s no telling how long the crossing will take.’ George had split his return journey into shorter voyages, stopping off for a few weeks in various ports along the way to see a little of the world before his return home. He had sent a few letters on ahead of him, but hadn’t specified the date he would be making the final crossing to Sydney.

He watched as the Petersons looked Alice over, taking in her bedraggled appearance and ill-fitting clothes.

‘This is Alice,’ he said, reaching up to take the bundle containing the orphaned joey from her lap before helping her down from the cart. He was pleased to see she didn’t recoil at his touch this time as she had in Sydney, although she did slip her hand from his as soon as she was steady on the ground. ‘She’s had a rough morning.’

Mrs Peterson looked her over, appraising her, then nodded her head. ‘Let’s get you settled, Alice, then in a couple of days we can find you some work to do.’

He watched as the two women moved inside, Alice’s petite figure dwarfed by Mrs Peterson’s. At least she was in safe hands now.

‘Let me take that for you,’ Mr Peterson said, gently taking hold of the bundle and peering inside. ‘Bringing home more waifs and strays, I see.’

George nodded, his eyes following Alice as she moved stiffly through the kitchen. She still looked wary, her eyes darting backward and forward as if always trying to find a way to escape, but he knew he just needed to give her time. Who knew what horrors and degradation she’d suffered on the transport ship from England, or indeed, who had tried to take advantage of her during the nine months she’d been in Australia? He knew life for the male convicts was tough, especially for the first few years of their sentence, but the female convicts were at risk of even more exploitation. It was by far enough to explain her fear and even anger—no one liked to feel helpless.

‘I’ll take care of this little creature,’ Mr Peterson said. ‘You reacquaint yourself with your home.’

Alone, George stood back and took in the view. He’d missed home, missed the picturesque sun-scorched fields and the hazy blue mountains in the distance. Missed his beautiful house with the veranda built in the perfect orientation to enjoy the sunsets. Missed the sense of purpose when he rode out over his land, designating each area for cattle or crops, always on the lookout for new opportunities. He’d enjoyed his trip to England, but he was mighty glad to be home.

After a minute he walked inside the house, using the kitchen door as he always had as a boy. Inside he could hear Mrs Peterson chattering away to Alice, telling her about the farm and their lives here. Turning away from the women, he moved through the house, running his fingers over the furniture, reacquainting himself with the space. He’d lived here all his life—the house had been built

by his father when his parents had first settled in Australia almost thirty years earlier. It was large, but still managed to have a comfortable feel about it.

‘Fitzgerald,’ a loud voice called from outside. ‘You’re home, you sneaky reprobate.’

With a grin on his lips George raced through the house and back out through the door, slowing only as he came up to the two men he thought of as his brothers.

He embraced Sam Robertson first, receiving a hearty slap on the back from him before he moved on and hugged Ben Crawford.

‘We had word your ship had docked,’ Robertson said. ‘We’ve been on the lookout for a week, but you managed to sneak through.’

‘It’s good to have you home,’ Crawford said, with a broad smile that must have matched George’s own.

They made their way into the house, the two men flopping down into chairs and making themselves comfortable. Although it was George’s home, both Robertson and Crawford had spent much of their youth there, taken in by George’s father after they had saved George from an attack by a poisonous snake while working on the farm. They had their own homes now, their own vast and successful farms, but they still came back to the Fitzgerald house regularly and George knew they still saw it as the home of their childhood.

‘We were getting worried you were never coming back,’ Robertson said, swinging back on the chair so only the back two legs were on the ground, shifting his weight so it balanced without toppling.

‘It’s a nine-month voyage,’ George said with a mock serious expression. ‘Some of us didn’t want to rush our time in England and set off back home two months after arriving. How is the fair Lady Georgina?’

‘Just plain Mrs Robertson now,’ Robertson said, and George could see the happiness on his face. ‘Beautiful and blooming, we’re hoping for a sister for little James in a few months.’

It felt strange to be talking of wives and children. His friends’ lives had changed so much these past couple of years and here he was back home to the same life. It was a good life, there was no denying it, but George knew his friends had moved on to the next stage while he remained in the same place.

‘And the new Mrs Crawford?’ he asked.

‘Not so new any more. We’ve been married for near on two years,’ Crawford said. ‘And Frannie is expecting again, too.’

‘It seems we have much to celebrate.’

‘How about you, Fitzgerald? You didn’t bring a bonny English lass back home with you?’

George laughed. ‘You two escaped with the two fairest women in England, I wasn’t about to settle for third best.’

From somewhere else in the house George could hear raised voices, stern words getting louder as the argument became more heated. He frowned. Mr and Mrs Peterson bickered, just like any couple who had lived together for so many years, but he’d never heard them argue before.

‘I’d better...’ he started to say, getting up from his chair, but didn’t get any further as Mrs Peterson burst into the room, dragging Alice behind her. ‘What is all this noise about?’ George asked, looking at the two women’s dark expressions. Mrs Peterson’s face was red with fury while Alice’s remained stony.

‘Begging your pardon, sir, I’m sorry for making a scene, especially with your guests here,’ Mrs Peterson said.

‘Don’t mind us,’ Robertson murmured, his eyes flicking from the older woman to Alice, then looking at George with an amused question in his expression.

‘She can’t stay,’ Mrs Peterson said with more dramatic flair than George had seen in the entire time he’d known his housekeeper.

‘I’m sure we can sort this out,’ George said, wishing momentarily for the free life he’d been living while away. He might not have a wife and child, but he did still have responsibilities here.

‘She’s been saying the most terrible things, sir, most wicked.’

He regarded Alice, who was standing up straight despite the pain she must have been feeling from her wounds, resolutely not looking at him, her expression that same mix of anger and fear she’d had ever since he’d helped her up from the ground near the whipping post.

‘Please excuse me,’ George said, a little annoyed to be pulled away from his friends at the moment of their reunion, but curious as to what the young convict woman could have said to upset his normally unflappable housekeeper.

He strode out of the room, turning back to see Alice having to be chivvied along by Mrs Peterson. With a shake of his head he wondered what he’d got himself into.

‘Would you sort some tea for Robertson and Crawford?’ George asked his housekeeper. She looked momentarily surprised, as if wanting to stay and defend the man who towered over both her and the new convict worker, but then rallied and bustled off down the corridor, murmuring under her breath.

‘Congratulations,’ George said after a minute. ‘I’ve never seen Mrs Peterson that irate before.’ He shook his head. ‘And I really tested her boundaries when I was a lad. What did you do?’

‘I merely spoke the truth,’ Alice’s reply came tersely.

‘I may be a man who seems to have time on his hands, Alice, but I would prefer it if you didn’t talk in riddles and told me straight out what upset Mrs Peterson.’

‘I called you a vile lecher.’ There was defiance in her eyes, but underneath George saw an unmistakable flash of fear.

He nodded slowly, tapping his fingers on the banister. ‘In the six hours that I’ve known you, tell me what is it that I’ve done to be given that label?’

She looked at him with a stony expression, but just shook her head.

‘Was it when I rushed in to save you from a whipping? Or when I volunteered to take you in as a convict worker to save you from a worse punishment? Or when I insisted you get cleaned up before we journeyed out here?’ George’s voice was completely calm, despite the bubble of irritation he felt rising up inside him. He struggled to suppress it. His father had always had infinite patience with those he helped and George knew he could do worse than emulate the man, in his kindness at least.

‘Why did you save me?’ Alice asked. ‘Why step in and risk a whipping yourself, or worse? Why volunteer to bring me back to your home?’ There was pent-up emotion in her words and George wondered not for the first time what had brought her to this life. Despite professing not to be interested in her crime during their ride to his home, he did want to know what had led her to the path she was on now.

He shrugged. ‘It seemed like the right thing to do.’

She laughed a bitter, mirthless laugh that cut right through him.

‘So I had the good fortune to be saved by the only decent man in Australia? Tell the truth. You wanted a young, willing and grateful woman in your bed, just like every other man in this godforsaken country.’

‘Look at me, Alice,’ George said, waiting for her eyes to reach his. Not for the first time he noticed their intensity, the deepness of the sparkling blue, and he realised she must have had it hard being a pretty young woman in a country filled with men. ‘Do I look like I need to force a woman into bed with me?’

As he watched her eyes flicked over him, taking in first his face and then his physique, until she shrugged rebelliously.

‘No one does anything for nothing,’ she muttered.

‘Yes, they do,’ he said firmly. ‘Now the problem arose when Mrs Peterson showed you to your room?’

She nodded. 'There's no lock on the door.'

'And you thought that was so I could sneak in at the stroke of midnight and have my wicked way with you?' He saw her redden at his directness and was pleased to be finally getting a reaction from her that wasn't suspicion or anger. 'Come with me.'

Without checking to see if she was following, he took the stairs two at a time, pausing only when he was outside the room Mrs Peterson had seen fit to give to Alice. It was a generously proportioned bedroom with a view over the farm and to Sydney in the distance. Furnished with a bed, wardrobe and writing table, it was homely and comfortable—no wonder Mrs Peterson took offence when Alice refused to settle herself in.

'You're right, there's no lock,' George said, 'just as there isn't a lock on my bedroom door, or any of the bedrooms. Not...' he held up an admonishing hand '...that I'm inviting you to find out. I find a chair wedged under the handle like this...' with a flourish he closed the door, took the back of the chair and propped it under the handle, demonstrating that the door could not be easily opened '...does the job.'

Alice was staring at him, blinking every few seconds as if she couldn't quite believe what she was seeing.

'I understand you don't trust me, Alice, and I don't think anything I can say will reassure you that I didn't bring you here for nefarious purposes, but my father always used to say that deeds spoke louder than words. Hopefully with time you will come to trust me.' He paused, wondering exactly what had happened to the young woman in front of him to make her quite so distrustful. 'Can I give you a word of advice, though? I wouldn't say anything bad about me to Mrs Peterson. For some strange reason she thinks I'm more virtuous than all the saints combined. If you want to have a moan about me, find someone more neutral.'

He turned, resisting the urge to delve into Alice's past. Perhaps one day she would want to tell him a little about what had brought her to this point in her life, or perhaps not.



'Sorted?' Crawford asked as George walked back into the room.

'Who knows?' George shrugged, wondering if Alice would be climbing out the window, risking being caught as a runaway just to avoid spending a night in his house.

'Who is she?' Robertson asked. 'And what is she doing here?'

'I ran into her when I got off the ship,' George said, sitting back down with his friends. 'One of the guards was whipping her, lashes that were far too brutal.'

Crawford grinned. 'You saved her?'

George rubbed his jaw, remembering the punches he'd received when he'd refused to back down.

'I politely asked them to desist with such a cruel and unnecessary punishment.'

'How many were there?'

'Five.'

Robertson studied his face carefully. 'Looks like they got a couple of good punches in.'

'I would have been tied to the post alongside Alice if Colonel Hardcastle hadn't turned up.'

'Our new Lieutenant Governor,' Crawford murmured. George could hear the approval in his voice.

'Hardcastle agreed to release Alice to me as a convict worker for the farm.'

George saw Robertson and Crawford exchanging looks and shook his head.

'Just like one of your injured animals,' Robertson said with a grin.

'Neither of you would have left her there,' George said with conviction. 'Not to that brutality.'

'It looks like you're going to have your hands full,' Crawford said.

He wasn't wrong. George had imagined Alice slotting into the life on the farm, taking up her role as a housemaid, perhaps helping with the kitchen garden, but that seemed a long way off for now. He shrugged. If things didn't work out, he could just send her to look after one of the properties he owned further afield. Whatever happened, he would be able to rest easy, knowing he hadn't abandoned her in her hour of need.

Chapter Four

Alice padded down the stairs, her footfalls silent on the thick rug that covered the wooden steps. Down below her she could hear the voices of the three men, laughing and talking as they had been for the past two hours. She'd made her peace with Mrs Peterson, apologising for her outburst and promising to keep her opinions to herself from now on. The older woman had been mollified and a few minutes later had brought Alice a few dresses to try on, clothing that fitted her better than the huge sack she'd travelled from Sydney in.

Now that she wasn't in fear of her dress falling down to her ankles with every step, she was feeling curious about her surroundings and had decided to explore a little. It wasn't as though Mr Fitzgerald had instructed her to keep to her room and Mrs Peterson had told her to take a few days to get settled before she started on the work of a housemaid.

Quietly she made her way down the hall, feeling like a thief as she trailed her fingers over the polished furniture and the collection of ornaments that seemed out of place out here in the middle of the Australian countryside. They would look more at home in an English manor house.

The kitchen was at the end of the hallway, a large room that still managed to feel homely despite its size. At one end the door was open to the outside and Alice looked around guiltily before placing her foot over the threshold.

'Don't be a fool,' she muttered to herself. 'It's not as though you're running away.'

Running away would be the worst thing she could do. Although she felt uncomfortable with her new circumstances, she knew she would be so much worse off if she was branded a convict runaway. She'd never known another convict woman who had dared. The men who tried to gain their freedom by heading off into the wilds of the countryside were always caught and brought back, their punishments ranging from a hundred lashes to being shipped off to one of the other penal colonies in Australia. Somewhere disease-ridden and much less civilised than Sydney. She shuddered at the thought.

Outside the sun was so bright it made her blink rapidly as her eyes struggled to adjust and the heat was much more noticeable than in the cool of the house. Over to the left was a little kitchen garden, with a vegetable patch and plants climbing up stakes. She could see Mr Peterson's bent form as he worked at picking whichever of the vegetables flourished in this climate.

To the right was a large enclosure with twenty or so cows huddled up one end and a little further away were horses grazing on the patchy grass behind a sturdy fence. With a hand shielding her eyes from the glare of the sun, Alice stopped for a moment and properly appreciated the view. Nine months she'd been in Australia and all she'd seen up until now was Sydney. The ramshackle buildings, the dusty streets, the weary faces. Out here was different. Out here she could see why some people seemed to fall in love with this country.

'Beautiful, isn't it?' a low voice said beside her.

Slowly she turned, finding Mr Fitzgerald standing a fair distance from her.

She nodded, watching as he moved closer, wary of his proximity, but noting how he stopped an arm's reach away. She couldn't fault his behaviour. Yet. She'd known men who bided their time before.

'I've stopped off in many countries on my way back to Australia,' he said, looking out over the rolling hills in front of them, 'and none of them is half as beautiful as here.'

It must be a wonderful thing to have a home you loved so much. Not since she'd left Yorkshire had Alice felt that way. The smog-filled streets of London weren't exactly inspiring and she hadn't seen anything but splashing waves and the rocking hull on the transport ship.

They stood in silence for a few minutes, Alice willing the man beside her to go away and leave her in peace, but he seemed happy just to stand there with her, looking out over the rolling fields.

‘Is this all your land?’ she asked eventually, motioning to the expanse in front of them.

‘As far as the eye can see. When my father first came out to settle here he bought a small farm and planted crops. He was purely an arable farmer for well over a decade. Then he began to anticipate the demands for more than just simple crops and branched out. Now the majority of the land I own is taken up with cattle, although we do still grow a selection of crops.’

‘And how about those?’ she asked, pointing in the direction of a small enclosure that housed a few kangaroos happily hopping around in the sun.

She watched as his face lit up with pure joy and wondered what sort of charmed life this man in front of her must have had to still be able to feel such a thing.

‘Come on, let me introduce you,’ he said, reaching out to grab her hand, but remembering her previous reactions to him just in time. Quickly he adjusted his behaviour and beckoned for her to follow him. He strode over to the fence and with a single movement vaulted over the wooden struts, turning back to assist her. Alice paused, eyeing the animals with uncertainty.

‘They’re one of the gentlest creatures I’ve ever met,’ he said, holding out his hand to help her over.

She hesitated for just a moment longer, then hitched up her skirts and climbed the fence, hopping down on the other side, resolutely refusing to take his hand even when she wobbled a little at the top. With amazement she watched as the biggest of the kangaroos hopped comically over to Mr Fitzgerald and began nuzzling him.

‘They’re your pets?’ she asked.

‘No, definitely not. They’re wild animals, but these three—’ he motioned to the three kangaroos now surrounding him ‘—I found injured in various ways over the years and brought back here to tend to their wounds. Once they’d recovered they didn’t seem to want to venture back into the wild, so they stay here.’

‘Like the little one you found this morning.’

‘Exactly. When he’s grown—if he survives, of course—I’ll try to release him, but who knows if he’ll go.’

She watched as he shrugged off his jacket in the heat before crouching down to get on the level of the kangaroos. Softly he stroked one after another, murmuring greetings and apologising for his long absence. The animals were larger than she’d imagined when she had first heard of the strange lolloping creatures that were native to Australia. The biggest of the three came up to her shoulder in height and had a rotund belly and large feet protruding out underneath it. They seemed friendly enough, but Alice hesitated in reaching out and stroking one—she’d never been very good with animals.

‘Try it,’ Mr Fitzgerald said, taking her hand gently and placing it on the kangaroos fur. ‘Hetty here is the gentlest creature in the world.’

‘Don’t,’ she hissed, pulling her hand out of his. He backed away slightly, but didn’t reprimand her or try to force the issue.

Alice felt as though her whole body was stiff and on edge, her instincts telling her to run, to get out of arm’s reach at the very least.

‘I think Hetty likes you,’ Mr Fitzgerald murmured.

Slowly Alice felt herself relax as the kangaroo cocked her head to one side and watched her out of big brown eyes. Tentatively she reached out a hand and placed it on the animal’s back. The fur was soft but short, more like a donkey or a horse to stroke than a dog, but as she stood there petting the animal Alice felt a peculiar peace come over her. A peace she hadn’t felt for a long time.

‘Shall we check on the little one we found earlier?’ Mr Fitzgerald asked as the kangaroos hopped off to find some shade.

It was a strange offer, but she was fast learning Mr Fitzgerald was a strange man. By rights they should be worlds apart, he a wealthy and respectable landowner and she a convict worker, but he spoke

to her as though she was a house guest rather than a maid. She could understand it more if he'd come from the same beginnings, but unlike a lot of men who owned land in Australia Mr Fitzgerald wasn't an ex-convict, he hadn't ever lived the life she lived. It made his compassion even more perplexing.

Don't be a fool, she told herself silently. It wasn't compassion. It wasn't anything more than trying to gain her trust.

She watched as he vaulted back over the fence, noticing not for the first time the strength in his arms and the chiselled contours of the muscles of his torso. Mr Fitzgerald was an attractive man, the sort of man she would have once lost her head over.

'Come on,' he said, looking back over his shoulder with a wide smile, the sun glinting off his bright blue eyes and making the neat-trimmed beard on his face appear golden.

This time he waited on the other side of the fence, standing back to allow her to climb over herself. Alice winced in pain as the skin on her back stretched and immediately he stepped forward, but one pointed glare was enough to stop him from touching her.

Leading the way back to the kitchen, he softened his steps as they crossed the threshold. Alice hadn't noticed the small bundle in the corner on her way out, but now they crossed quietly over to it.

'Looks peaceful, doesn't he?' Mr Fitzgerald said, crouching down and motioning for her to join him.

'Will he live?' Alice asked as she tentatively reached out a hand to stroke the soft brown fur.

'I think so. He looks about five months old, so not so young he can't survive without his mother. Hopefully with a little milk and a few days to adjust he'll start to thrive soon.'

The little kangaroo looked up at her with blinking eyes and Alice felt a rush of affection for the animal. They'd both been saved this morning.

Carefully Mr Fitzgerald reached down and scooped the young joey into his arms and held him out for her to hold.

'He won't bite.'

Alice still hesitated.

'He's lost his mother. A little affection will go a long way.'

Placing the bundle in her arms, Mr Fitzgerald took a step back and Alice found herself wondering why this man in front of her didn't have a wife and a brood of children. Looking down at the kangaroo in her arms, she felt a tug of regret at the loss of her own family. Not for Bill, the good-for-nothing scoundrel who had led her into trouble in London, but for her parents and her sisters. People who she would probably never see again.

'Have the gentlemen, your friends, left?' she asked, grasping for a subject of conversation to distract herself from her maudlin thoughts.

'They have, although I'm sure I will see them again before the week is out.'

'You seemed very close,' she murmured, knowing she was being presumptuous, but Mr Fitzgerald's easy manner was hard not to emulate.

'They're like the brothers I never had. Friendship is a wonderful thing...' He paused, looking at her in that perceptive way of his. 'I'm sure you've found that during your time in Australia.'

Alice looked away, blinking to try to disguise the tears in her eyes. There should have been comradeship between the female convicts, but it just wasn't the case. Many of them had suffered atrociously on the transport ship and as soon as they'd arrived had set about looking for a man to protect them. Alice hadn't wanted that and that had made her stand apart from the rest of the women.

'No,' she said quietly. 'It hasn't been like that.'

He regarded her for a moment and not for the first time Alice felt as though he was seeing past the hard exterior she projected to the world. The thought made her uncomfortable.

'I should go and see if Mrs Peterson needs any help,' she said quickly, rising to her feet and placing the baby kangaroo back in Mr Fitzgerald's arms.

Hurrying off, she chided herself for being a coward. It was herself she was running from, the strange urge she had to relax, to allow herself to let down her guard when she was with Mr Fitzgerald. She didn't know if it was the cheerful smile, the mischievous twinkle in his eyes or the kindness he'd shown her, but something made her heart beat faster whenever he accidentally brushed against her, even though his interest was the last thing she wanted. Shaking her head, she tried to put him out of her mind. She would do better to remember the trouble men had brought her in the past and continue in her mistrust, even if Mr Fitzgerald was relentlessly kind.

Chapter Five

‘If you don’t hold your tongue, I will come over there and give you a thrashing, open wounds or no.’ Mrs Peterson’s irate voice rang through the house, causing George to pause and put down the papers he was reading. It had been almost a week since he’d returned home, a week since Alice had first stepped over the threshold into the farmhouse, and it had been far from the most peaceful week of his life.

He listened for Alice’s reply, hearing a low murmur, but not the words.

‘I’ve never heard such vile rudeness.’ Mrs Peterson’s voice rose again and with a groan George hauled himself to his feet. There was at least one altercation a day between Alice and his housekeeper. And even in between the sharp words there were long periods of sharp silence.

‘Is there a problem?’ he asked, striding into the kitchen.

‘She has got to go,’ Mrs Peterson said, crossing her arms in front of her chest and breathing heavily.

‘I’d be delighted to,’ Alice said, flashing a look that contained a challenge in his direction.

‘No one is going anywhere. Alice, join me in my study, please. Mrs Peterson...’ He looked at his fuming housekeeper and gave her his most winning smile. ‘Whatever you’ve got cooking smells delicious.’ It was the truth—wafts of spices and fruit, mixed with the unmistakable smell of gingerbread baking, took him back to the Christmases of his youth.

George turned, not waiting to see if Alice followed, and made his way back into his study, sitting down heavily in the comfortable leather-lined chair behind his desk.

‘Sit,’ he said, motioning to a chair facing him.

Alice sat, looking defiant.

‘I really don’t know how you do it,’ he said quietly. ‘Mrs Peterson can be a bit prickly, but I’ve never actually seen her angry before.’

Alice shrugged, a non-committal gesture that hid a world of pain.

‘I know what you’re doing.’

Her eyes darted up to meet his.

‘You think if you make a nuisance of yourself I’ll send you back to Sydney. The thing I can’t understand is why. It’s comfortable here, the work is easier than the laundry, you’re safe and you’re not under the direct scrutiny of the guards the whole time. Surely here is better than where you were?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Alice said, her voice emotionless.

‘Is there something you’re missing in Sydney? Or someone, perhaps?’

‘No.’ The denial was hard and fast and George was inclined to believe it.

‘I want you to be comfortable here, Alice.’

‘Why?’

‘Because everyone deserves a little humanity and I think you’ve experienced barely any at all these last couple of years.’

‘No one does something for nothing.’

He looked at her, feeling regret that such a young woman had been brought down to feel this way. Once Alice would have been trusting and content with the world—her attitude now was a testament to the suffering she had endured.

‘Let’s make an agreement,’ he said, waiting for her to look up to continue. ‘Give it one month. If you’re still not happy here in one month, then you can return to whatever post they will give you in Sydney. I’ll arrange it. I give you my word.’

She eyed him suspiciously.

‘The only thing I ask for is that you give life out here a chance. You look for the positives, stop riling Mrs Peterson and see if this is somewhere you would like to spend the last few years of your sentence.’

‘And if I decide not to stay, you’ll let me go?’ Alice asked.

‘On my honour.’

She sat thinking for a moment, then nodded. He even saw a hint of a smile under the prickly façade.

‘This is your home, at least for the next month, and if you decide you want to stay for a couple of years, I want you to be comfortable. And I want you to stop provoking Mrs Peterson. Can you do that?’

‘I can try.’



Pulling on the soft leather, George changed his boots for the pair he used when out riding the vast distances around his farms. It felt good to be home and he was eager to get out and continue reacquainting himself with the land he loved so much.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the swish of material as Alice padded silently around the house. He could tell she felt awkward, unsure of her position, but he hoped in a couple of days Mrs Peterson would have found her some work she could take charge of and make her own. There had been an uneasy truce between Alice and Mrs Peterson the last couple of days since he had taken Alice into his study and made the agreement that she would make an effort to see Mountain View Farm as her home for the month before they decided on the longer-term plan.

It felt strange to have another person in the house. For a long while before his trip to England it had been just him and the Petersons and it was odd to wake up and find someone else walking through the otherwise empty halls.

Throughout his childhood his parents had always had at least a few convict workers doing the manual work in the fields alongside the regular workers and the free-men they hired seasonally as the demands of the farm increased. Only once had they had a female convict worker. With a frown George put that memory from mind. He wasn’t his father, he wasn’t the same man and he didn’t have to make the same mistakes.

His parents had enjoyed living a life without too many servants, just a housekeeper and a cook and a maid, and he had happily survived with just the Petersons for the past eight years.

Still, Alice was here now and hopefully before long she would have slotted into life at Mountain View Farm.

As he stood up he saw Alice come walking out of his study with a book open and her eyes skimming over the words. For a second he felt his breath catch in his chest. Today for the first time she was dressed in a dress that more or less fit her. The light blue cotton clung to the curves of her chest and waist before skimming out over her hips into a full skirt. It accentuated her figure and George felt the first stirrings of desire. A very inappropriate desire.

His eyes travelled upwards to the neat curls of her hair. The past week her hair had remained the untamed frizz it had been whipped into after the bath in the tavern in Sydney, which had been followed by a long and dusty cart ride to the farm. She must have begged a bath from Mrs Peterson the night before and the results were astounding. Today her hair looked like spun gold with just a hint of red, smooth waves that fell way past her shoulders.

She looked up, surprise registering in her sparkling blue eyes, and then gave him a tentative smile.

George felt as though he’d been punched in the gut and struggled to make his voice sound normal as he greeted her.

‘Good morning, Alice,’ he said, wondering where the scruffy convict he’d rescued over a week ago had gone.

‘Good morning, Mr Fitzgerald,’ she said, hesitating a moment and then dipping into a little curtsy. Her manner was still often skittish and fearful, but over the past few days a lot of the anger she’d had when she had first arrived had ebbed away. ‘I hope you don’t mind, sir, but Mrs Peterson said I could borrow a book or two.’

‘Of course. No point the books gathering dust when someone wants to read them.’

He glanced at the cover of the book, expecting to see one of his mother’s awful adventure stories, but instead was surprised to find a book about botany in her hands. She was clasping it to her chest and unwittingly George’s eyes travelled from the rough leather of the book to the rather smoother skin that peeked out above the neckline of her dress.

Get a hold of yourself, he silently chastised himself. He was being exactly the lecherous sort of man Alice had been afraid of. Exactly the sort of man he had always vowed never to be.

‘Botany,’ he said, forcing his eyes back up to her face. ‘Are you interested in it?’

She shrugged and he fancied he saw her blush a little, just a hint of colour on her cheeks.

‘I don’t know anything about it,’ she admitted, ‘but when I flicked through it looked interesting.’

‘That book there is focused mainly on plants of England, or at least western Europe. There are no comprehensive guides to the flora of Australia yet.’ He thought of the hundreds of samples of plants he’d collected over the years, some dried and pressed and kept meticulously in his study, some planted from seed and nurtured in the private garden around the side of the house. One day there would be a book on the flora of Australia and he meant to contribute to it.

Mrs Peterson bustled out from the kitchen and stopped for a moment, looking between them before smiling.

‘Are you off out, Mr Fitzgerald?’ she asked, reaching for his jacket from the hook on the wall and passing it over to him.

‘Just off to inspect some of the fields, take a look at the cattle,’ he said. ‘Mr Williams is due later today to hand things back over to me. If he arrives before I return, will you make him comfortable?’

‘Of course, sir. I’ve got a lovely batch of biscuits about to pop in the oven. I’m sure I can distract him with a cool drink and a biscuit or two if you’re late.’

Mr Williams was the very capable man he’d left in charge of his farms for the duration of his trip to England. George had been away almost three years and a lot could change in that time and he was eager to start getting control of everything again. He was sure there had been no major disasters—for the past two years Robertson and Crawford had been back home and they would have kept an eye on everything for him. They hadn’t mentioned anything going wrong so he was confident Mr Williams wouldn’t have any terrible news for him.

‘Thank you, Mrs Peterson.’ He took a step towards the door and hesitated. Knowing he would regret the offer, he still couldn’t stop himself. ‘Would you like to come and see some of the farm?’ he asked Alice.

She blinked in surprise and George found himself smiling. He liked how she wasn’t able to hide when something shocked her, her eyes reacted before she had time to take hold of herself.

‘This is to be your home for the next couple of years if you decide to stay with us,’ he reminded her gently. ‘Perhaps you’d like to see a little of where you’ll be living.’

‘That’s very kind, Mr Fitzgerald,’ Alice said, ‘but I wouldn’t want to hamper your progress.’

‘Nonsense,’ he said. She would hamper his progress, of course she would. He doubted a woman of her background would know how to ride, at least not proficiently, but he realised he didn’t regret the offer all the same.

‘I would like to see a little more of the countryside,’ she said, looking at him as if she couldn’t quite believe she was saying the words. He knew she still distrusted him, so for her to agree to ride out alone with him was certainly a step in the right direction.

‘Wonderful.’ He looked at her appraisingly. The dress did much for her figure, but he doubted it would be the most suitable thing for a trip into the countryside. ‘Can you ride, Alice?’ he asked.

She laughed, the first proper laugh he'd heard pass her lips. 'Of course.' Seeing his look of surprise, she continued. 'My family had a horse up in Whitby. We lived a little out of the way so it was necessary for getting into town.' Alice looked down at herself and shrugged, 'I can't ride in that fancy way, though.'

'Side saddle?'

She shook her head, 'We only had a normal saddle, so that's all I can do.'

'I don't think that'll be a problem.' He leaned in closer and lowered his voice, 'One of the best things about Australia is how you can ride for a good couple of hours and not see another soul. No one is going to be judging you.'

They stepped outside, George trying to ignore the disapproving look from Mrs Peterson. She'd been with the family for years, having been transported well over two decades previously for some long-forgotten crime, and she was very protective of him. She was also quite old fashioned in her ways, thinking the servants should stick to below stairs, metaphorically, of course, and the masters above. This sort of mixing was out of the question.

'Wait,' Alice said, stopping so abruptly his body almost collided with hers. She turned and rushed back inside, leaving him staring after her. It gave him a moment to get control of himself, to regain his equilibrium and promise himself he would not look at Alice with anything other than mild, friendly interest.

She came back out, brandishing a bonnet.

'I found it in my room.' She grimaced 'I may as well try to protect my skin from any further damage in this sun.'

From her colouring he could tell she should have naturally pale skin, but exposure to the strong Australian summer sun had pinkened her nose and cheeks and there was a smattering of freckles dotted about as well. The ladies of London he'd spent the last couple of years socialising with would be aghast at such colouring, but it wasn't uncommon among the women here. The summers were hotter and everyone spent more time outdoors, it was no surprise both the men and women of Australia had more of a tan on their faces.

Outside Mr Peterson had saddled a horse and left it tied to a fencepost ready for him and it was the work of a couple of minutes to get another horse ready for Alice. She watched him as he tightened the strap to secure the saddle, before looping over the bridle.

'Mrs Peterson tells me you're English nobility,' Alice said, her eyes following his every movement. 'I've never known an English lord to saddle his own horse.'

'I'm no lord,' George said, shaking his head. 'My father was the younger son of a baron, a destitute baron. He inherited no title and no money. We have ties to the nobility, but I view myself as a farmer, a landowner, nothing more.'

His identity was important to him and he certainly did not feel as though he'd fitted in with the lords and ladies of London society during his recent stint in England. Their customs had seemed too rigid and old fashioned and he'd returned to Australia knowing even more than ever that this was where he wanted to be.

Holding out a hand, he wondered if she would take it. Alice had thawed in her attitude towards him since their initial interactions, but she still seemed skittish and he wasn't sure if she would allow him to help her up on to the horse.

Stepping forward, she hesitated for a long moment before grasping hold of the saddle and placing her foot in his hand, allowing him to boost her up and then steady her while she found her seat. In the process of mounting her skirt had hitched up and caught around her thighs, exposing one of her calves. Trying not to look, George tugged at the material, covering her up again, his fingers accidentally brushing against her soft skin as he did so. Alice stiffened beneath his touch, brushing him away.

Without another word he turned and led her horse out of the stables to where his was waiting.

‘Good morning, Kareela,’ he said, stopping to stroke the horse’s nose. Three years he’d been gone and there was still recognition in the animal’s eyes. Quickly he mounted, feeling the satisfying pull of muscles he hadn’t used for a long time. The voyage home had taken him an entire year with lengthy stops in various countries and in that time he’d only ridden twice. It felt good to be back on horseback and he urged Kareela forward with a gentle nudge of his heels.

They took the track out that they’d arrived on, George choosing a sedate pace to let Alice get used to riding again after so long.

‘Just over a week ago I was stuck in the laundry all day long,’ Alice murmured, ‘and now I’m here.’

The laundry would be a grim place to work, although not the worst convict job in Sydney by far.

‘Via the whipping post.’

She nodded, flinching at the memory. ‘They were determined to get me somehow,’ she murmured.

George frowned, not understanding the comment.

Alice shook her head and smiled as if determined to put something out of her mind.

‘Did they set you up?’ he asked. Robertson and Crawford had both been convicts and before they’d landed jobs on his father’s farm they’d spent a couple of years doing the backbreaking work of road building in Sydney under cruel and malicious guards. Their stories did not make you feel confident in the humanity of the men sent to guard the convicts and inflict the punishments if someone stepped out of line. George could well believe a particularly nasty guard would set someone up for a whipping for their own amusement.

‘Not exactly.’ She shook her head. ‘I stole the bread I was whipped for.’ He thought she wasn’t going to elaborate for a moment, but then she sighed. ‘Just not for myself. For one of the other women’s sons. He’s only six and has a terrible chest. All skin and bones and his mother was struggling to feed him. So I took a little extra bread to try to feed him up.’

‘And they whipped you for that?’

‘It’s all about control, isn’t it?’ she said with a hint of anger in her voice. ‘They stop seeing us as living, breathing humans with a heart and a history and see us as criminals who shouldn’t have any rights and just need to be controlled.’

‘I think transportation is one of the harshest punishments, aside from hanging, of course,’ George said quietly. ‘They take your freedom, but they take so much more than that. They take your future, or at least the future you’d envisaged. They rip you away from everyone and everything you’ve ever known and ship you to a strange country where even the smallest misdemeanour is seen as a rebellion against the authorities.’

‘But perhaps we deserve it,’ Alice said quietly.

George looked at her, but she’d turned her face away, staring off into the distance. He couldn’t imagine this young woman doing anything so reprehensible that she deserved to be transported for her crimes.

You don’t know her, he reminded himself. He didn’t know anything about her, not other than what she had chosen to tell him. It was a timely warning. She might seem sweet and kind, she might look like an angel from heaven, but something had led her to being convicted and sentenced to transportation and although he knew there were many miscarriages of justice, she’d never protested that this was the case for her.

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