

**Mystic Mountains Excerpt:**

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 dearie, '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 a 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 he'd 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'd 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 swayed.

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 wellpadded bottom. The others followed her.

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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'd 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. It was an unnerving sensation, peculiar in its uniqueness.