

**DISTANT MOUNTAINS EXCERPT:**

Rem stared at Sara Greenwood, unable to take his eyes off this beauty. She was, without a doubt, the most entrancing creature he'd ever seen. With hair and eyes as black as sin and flawless skin like pure porcelain, her face was that of a goddess. A bloom on her cheeks gave her face a vital sheen of good health. How his fingers itched to unpin her silken tresses from their neat coils. He ached to touch that skin to see if it felt as soft and downy as it looked.

She carried her youth and beauty with a proud bearing missing in so many of the young women in the colony; these women brooded and sulked, despairing of their lot in life after being dragged to this awful continent by their fathers against their will. Most had pasty faces they kept well hidden beneath large-brimmed bonnets to shield them from the sun they saw as an enemy to their complexions.

Rem thanked God it was a Sunday, and they allowed him to join the small gathering. The thought he might have missed meeting this goddess made him shudder. Tiger made a habit of inviting all newcomers to the district to his and Bella's home soon after their arrival. The Greenwoods had recently settled here after living in Sydney for five years. Bella met them briefly on a trip into town, and Rem knew by her remarks she wasn't particularly enamored of Edmund Greenwood or his timid wife Eleanor. Rem couldn't give a damn about them, but was already half in love with their daughter.

"So charmed to meet you," Sara was saying to Bella and Tiger, who were decked out in the finery kept solely for such occasions.

Extending her long, slender fingers, Sara took their welcoming outstretched hands one after the other. Turning to Rem, she offered the same delicate hand, and he bowed over it reverently. Her scent filled his nostrils, battered at his senses. Like a garden in full bloom, or a bowl of roses. Not very poetic, he knew, but she would forever remind him of a spring day; an English one, where rosebuds sent out their fragrance to entice the bees, and butterflies were entranced by the colors.

Rem realized his breathing was as uneven as his heartbeat. As he straightened, their eyes met, and for one infinitesimal moment Rem felt sure a message passed between them. Could she be as smitten as he?

"We are delighted to meet you at last," Bella said, and for a moment, Rem wondered what she was talking about. So entranced was he, everything had gone out of his head, except this vision of loveliness.

"How do you find it here in Bathurst?" Bella asked graciously as they all took seats on the porch.

Sara spread the skirt of her blue dress about her knees, her dainty feet clad in black pumps peeped beneath the hem. Those bewitching eyes, filled with a sort of devilment met Rem's as Bella continued, "I'm so glad the weather has seen fit to hold." She looked to the sky, where a weak winter sun tried its damndest to shine through the gray clouds.

“As I’m mighty glad it’s decided not to rain before we’ve had a chance to settle in our house,” Sara’s burly father said, as he settled his large frame on a chair, and huffed. “I must say I’m also glad we brought plenty of help with us to this godforsaken neck of the woods.” He had a perpetual air of grievance about him, as if the world should have tried harder to do better by him.

“‘Tis a good life, once you grow used to it, and if you’re prepared to work hard for what you wish to attain, it’s very rewarding,” Tiger said, looking out over his land. It was obvious to Rem his brother-in-law was no more enamored of this man than he was. Edmund Greenwood was brusque to the point of rudeness and loud-mouthed. How did an ugly brutish man manage to sire an angel like Sara? And how did her meek and homely mother ever produce such a beauty? Perhaps she had been adopted. The thought made him smile, and he glanced over at his angel in time to see her watching him, her delicate brows raised.

Turning to Sara’s mother, Bella offered, “You must call on me for any help you need. We lean on each other out here where months can go by without us seeing anyone from the other side of the mountains.”

The pallid, insignificant woman looked to be about sixty in age, but was more than likely only in her forties. Rem suspected years of living with a boor had etched those deep lines on her face. Her pinched mouth looked forever on the verge of protest. Though, Rem doubted she would ever dare to come forth with a complaint.

“Thank you.” The words came out on a thready whisper. Glancing up like a scared hare, Mrs. Greenwood added, “I didn’t want to come,” earning a wrathful glare from her husband.

“Balderdash!” Edmund waved an arm, his brows beetling, and she seemed to shrivel even more. “You’ll soon get used to it. And with kindly ladies like Mrs. Carstairs here” —he gave Bella a sickly, condescending glance—“you’ll soon acclimatize.”

“I found it very strange when I first arrived in the colony.” Bella smiled at Mrs. Greenwood, and Rem thought, for the umpteenth time, what a lovely woman his sister was. “And please call me Bella,” she invited. “Everyone does. We don’t stand on ceremony here. Being so isolated we have to become friends.”

Rem wondered if these people knew his sister and her husband had both been convicts, sent to the colony by the British Government, same as he had. No doubt they did, for news travelled fast despite the great distances. Gossip was rife among the Exclusives and the Emancipists.

“Course you did. We all have to learn to change.” Edmund gave his wife a look that said she would have to change, or accept his wrath. Her hands trembled, and she twined them together on her lap.

“And how do you like living so far from the town?” Rem turned to ask the beauty seated beside him.

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She shrugged. Her pouting lips were as soft, full, and pink as the rosebuds she smelt of. His insides ached with the desire to see if they tasted half as sweet as they looked. Jesus, he wanted to ravish her, to strip her and taste every part of the delectable body he knew the wool of her garment hid.

Her eyes slid from his dark red curls to the boots he was glad he'd polished for the occasion. Something deep inside him began to shake with his response.

Barely past her seventeenth birthday, so Bella had told him, and already she wore the look of a woman in control of her life and her responses. How he would like to help her lose her cool control. He made up his mind that would be his driving purpose in life from now on; sure in his conceit he would win her no matter what.

"I would have liked to stay in Sydney Town. I have my governess and companion still, who accompanied us over here, so I will have to bear it. For a while." She sounded utterly bored, and Rem wanted to stand up and shout that he would take her wherever she yearned to go.