



THE EXILES

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PROLOGUE

Flinders Island, Australia, 1840

By the time the rains came, Mathinna had been hiding in the bush for nearly two days. She was eight years old, and the most important thing she'd ever learnt was how to disappear. Since she was old enough to walk, she'd explored every nook and crevice of Wybalenna, the remote point on Flinders Island where her people had been exiled since before she was born. She'd run along the granite ridge that extended across the tops of the hills, dug tunnels in the sugary dunes on the beach, played seek-and-find among the scrub and shrubs. She knew all the animals: the possums and wallabies and kangaroos, the pademelons that lived in the forest and only came out at night, the seals that lolled on rocks and rolled into the surf to cool off.

Three days earlier, Governor John Franklin and his wife, Lady Jane, had arrived at Wybalenna by boat, more than 250 miles from their residence on the

island of Lutruwita – or Van Diemen’s Land, as the white people called it. Mathinna stood with the other children on the ridge as the governor and his wife made their way up from the beach, accompanied by half a dozen servants. Lady Franklin had a hard time walking in her shiny satin shoes; she kept slipping on the stones. She clung to her husband’s arm as she wobbled towards them, the expression on her face as sour as if she’d bitten an artichoke thistle. The wrinkles on her neck reminded Mathinna of the exposed pink flesh of a wattlebird.

The night before, the Palawa elders had sat around the campfire, discussing the impending visit. The Christian missionaries had been preparing for days. The children had been instructed to learn a dance. Mathinna sat in the darkness on the edge of the circle, as she often did, listening to the elders talk as they plucked feathers from muttonbirds and roasted mussels in the glowing embers. The Franklins, it was widely agreed, were impulsive, foolish people; stories abounded of their strange and eccentric schemes. Lady Franklin was deathly afraid of snakes. She’d once devised a plan to pay a shilling for every dead snake turned in, which naturally spawned a robust market of breeders and cost her and Sir John a small fortune. When the two of them had visited Flinders the previous year, it was to collect Aboriginal skulls for their collection – skulls that were obtained by decapitating corpses and boiling the heads to remove the flesh.

The horse-faced Englishman in charge of the settlement on Flinders, George Robinson, lived with

his wife in a brick house in a semicircle of eight brick houses that included rooms for his men, a sanatorium and a dispensary. Behind this were twenty cottages for the Palawa. The night the Franklins arrived, they slept in the Robinsons' house. Early the next morning, they inspected the settlement while their servants distributed beads and marbles and handkerchiefs. After the noontime meal, the natives were summoned. The Franklins sat in two mahogany chairs in the sandy clearing in front of the brick houses, and for the next hour or so the few healthy Palawa males were made to perform a mock battle and engage in a spear-throwing contest. Then the children were paraded out.

As Mathinna danced in a circle with the others on the white sand, Lady Franklin kept looking at her with a curious smile.

The daughter of the chief of the Lowreenne tribe, Mathinna had long been accustomed to special attention. Several years ago, her father, Towterer – like so many of the Palawa deported to Flinders – had died of tuberculosis. Mathinna was proud to be the chieftain's daughter, but in truth she hadn't known him well. When she was three, she'd been sent from her parents' cottage to live in a brick house with the white schoolteacher, who made her wear bonnets and dresses with buttons and taught her to read and write in English and hold a knife and spoon. Even so, she spent as many hours a day as she could with her mother, Wanganip, and other members of the tribe, most of whom did not speak English or adhere to British customs.

It had only been a few months since Mathinna's mother had died. Wanganip had always hated Flinders. She'd often climb the spiny hill near the settlement and gaze across the turquoise sea towards her homeland, sixty miles away. This terrible place, she told Mathinna – this barren island where the wind was so strong it spun vegetables out of the ground and fanned small fires into raging infernos, where the trees shed bark like snakes shed their skin – was nothing like her ancestral land. It was a curse on her soul. On all of their souls. Their people were sickly; most of the babies born on Flinders died before their first birthdays. The Palawa had been promised a land of peace and plenty; if they did as they were told, the British said, they'd be allowed to keep their way of life. 'But all of that was a lie. Like so many lies we were foolish to believe,' Wanganip said bitterly. 'What choice did we have? The British had already taken everything.'

Looking into her mother's face, Mathinna saw the fury in her eyes. Mathinna didn't hate the island, though. It was the only home she'd ever known.

'Come here, child,' the governor's wife said when the dance was over, beckoning with a finger. When Mathinna obeyed, Lady Franklin peered at her closely before turning to her husband. 'Such expressive eyes! And a sweet face, don't you think? Unusually attractive for a native.'

Sir John shrugged. 'Hard to tell them apart, quite frankly.'

'I wonder if it might be possible to educate her.'

'She lives with the schoolteacher, who is teaching

her English,' Robinson said, stepping forward. 'She's quite conversant already.'

'Interesting. Where are her parents?'

'The girl is an orphan.'

'I see.' Lady Franklin turned back to Mathinna. 'Say something.'

Mathinna half curtsied. The arrogant rudeness of the British no longer surprised her. 'What shall I say, ma'am?'

Lady Franklin's eyes widened. 'Goodness! I am impressed, Mr Robinson. You are turning savages into respectable citizens.'

'In London, I hear, they're dressing orangutans like lords and ladies and teaching them to read,' Sir John mused.

Mathinna didn't know what an orangutan was, but she'd heard talk of savages around the elders' campfire – British whalers and sealers who lived like animals and sneered at rules of common decency. Lady Franklin must be confused.

Robinson gave a short laugh. 'This is a bit different. The Aborigines are human, after all. Our theory is that by changing externals you can change personalities. We are teaching them to eat our food and learn our language. We feed their souls with Christianity. They've surrendered to clothes, as you can see. We've cut the hair of the men and impressed modesty on the women. We've given them Christian names to aid the process.'

'The mortality rate is quite high, I understand,' said Sir John. 'Delicate constitutions.'

‘An unfortunate inevitability,’ Robinson said. ‘We brought them out of the bush where they knew not God, nor even who made the trees.’ He gave a small sigh. ‘The fact is, we all must die, and we ought to pray to God first to save our souls.’

‘Quite right. You’re doing them a great service.’

‘What is this one’s name?’ Lady Franklin asked, returning her attention to Mathinna.

‘Mary.’

‘And what was it originally?’

‘Originally? Mathinna was her Aboriginal name. She was christened Leda by missionaries. We decided on something less . . . fanciful,’ Robinson said.

Mathinna didn’t remember being called Leda, but her mother had hated the name Mary, so the Palawa refused to use it. Only the British called her Mary.

‘Well, I think she’s charming,’ Lady Franklin said. ‘I’d like to keep her.’

Keep her? Mathinna tried to catch Robinson’s eye, but he didn’t return her gaze.

Sir John looked amused. ‘You want to take her home with us? After what happened with the last one?’

‘This will be different. Timeo was . . .’ Lady Franklin shook her head. ‘The girl is an orphan, you said?’ she asked, turning to Robinson.

‘Yes. Her father was a chieftain. Her mother remarried, but recently died.’

‘Does that make her a princess?’

He smiled slightly. ‘Of a sort, perhaps.’

‘Hmm. What do you think, Sir John?’

Sir John smiled beneficently. ‘If you wish to amuse

yourself in such a fashion, my dear, I suppose there's no harm in it.'

'I think it will be entertaining.'

'And if it isn't, we can always send her back.'

Mathinna did not want to leave the island with these foolish people. She did not want to say goodbye to her stepfather and the other elders. She did not want to go to a strange new place where nobody knew or cared about her. Tugging on Robinson's hand, she whispered, 'Please, sir. I don't—'

Slipping his hand from her grasp, he turned to the Franklins. 'We will make the necessary arrangements.'

'Very well.' Lady Franklin cocked her head, appraising her. '*Mathinna*. I'd prefer to call her that. It will be more of a surprise if she achieves the manners of a lady.'

Later, when the governor's party was distracted, Mathinna slipped behind the brick houses where everyone was gathered, still wearing the ceremonial wallaby-skin cape her father gave her before he died and a necklace of tiny green shells made by her mother. Wending her way through wallaby grass, silky against her shins, she listened to the barking dogs and the currawongs, plump black birds that warbled and flapped their wings when rain was on the way. She breathed in the familiar scent of eucalyptus. As she slid into the bush at the edge of the clearing, she looked up to see a geyser of muttonbirds erupt into the sky.



EVANGELINE

I never know an instance of any female convict coming out that I would consider a fair character. Their open and shameless vice must be told. Their fierce and untamable audacity would not be believed. They are the pest and gangrene of the colonial society – a reproach to human nature – and lower than the brutes, a disgrace to all animal existence.

– James Mudie, *The Felonry of New South Wales: Being a Faithful Picture of the Real Romance of Life in Botany Bay*, 1837

ST JOHN'S WOOD, LONDON

1840

From within the depths of a restless dream, Evangeline heard a knocking. She opened her eyes. Silence. Then, more insistent: *rapraprap*.

Thin light from the small window high above her bed cut across the floor. She felt a surge of panic: she must have slept through the morning bell.

She never slept through the morning bell.

Sitting up, she felt woozy. She leant back against her pillow. 'Just a minute.' Her mouth filled with saliva and she swallowed it.

'The children are waiting!' The scullery maid's voice rang with indignation.

'What time is it, Agnes?'

'Half nine!'

Sitting up again, Evangeline pushed back the covers. Bile rose in her throat, and this time she couldn't keep it down; she leant over and vomited on the pine floor.

The knob turned and the door swung open. She looked up helplessly as Agnes twitched her nose and frowned at the viscous yellow splatter at her feet. ‘Give me a minute. Please.’ Evangeline wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

Agnes didn’t move. ‘Did ye eat something strange?’
‘I don’t think so.’

‘Feverish?’

Evangeline pressed her hand against her forehead. Cool and clammy. She shook her head.

‘Been feeling poorly?’

‘Not until this morning.’

‘Hmm.’ Agnes pursed her lips.

‘I’m all right, I’m just—’ Evangeline felt a roiling in her gut. She swallowed hard.

‘Clearly you’re not. I’ll inform Mrs Whitstone there’ll be no lessons today.’ With a curt nod, Agnes turned to leave, then paused, narrowing her eyes in the direction of the chest of drawers.

Evangeline followed her gaze. On the top, beside an oval mirror, a ruby gemstone ring glowed in the sunlight, staining the white handkerchief it lay on a deep red.

Her heart clenched. She’d been admiring the ring by the light of a candle the night before and had stupidly forgotten to put it away.

‘Where’d ye get that?’ Agnes asked.

‘It was . . . a gift.’

‘Who from?’

‘A family member.’

‘*Your* family?’ Agnes knew full well that Evangeline

had no family. She'd only applied to be a governess because she had nowhere else to turn.

'It was . . . an heirloom.'

'I've never seen ye wear it.'

Evangeline put her feet on the floor. 'For goodness' sake. I don't have much occasion, do I?' she said, attempting to sound brusque. 'Now, will you leave me be? I'm perfectly fine. I'll meet the children in the library in a quarter of an hour.'

Agnes gave her a steady look. Then she left the room, pulling the door shut behind her.

Later Evangeline would replay this moment in her head a dozen ways – what she might have said or done to throw Agnes off the trail. It probably wouldn't have mattered. Agnes had never liked her. Only a few years older than Evangeline, she'd been in service to the Whitstones for nearly a decade and lorded her institutional knowledge over Evangeline with supercilious condescension. She was always chiding her for not knowing the rules or grasping how things worked. When Evangeline confided in the assistant butler, her one ally in the household, that she didn't understand Agnes's palpable contempt, he shook his head. 'Come now. Don't be naive. Until you arrived, she was the only eligible lass in the place. Now you're the one drawing all the attention – including from the young master himself. Who used to flirt with Agnes, or so she believed. And on top of that, your job is soft.'

'It isn't!'

'It's not like hers, though, is it? Scrubbing linens with lye and emptying chamber pots from dawn till

dusk. You're paid for your brains, not your back. No surprise she's tetchy.'

Evangeline rose from her bed, and, carefully stepping around the puddle, went to the chest of drawers. Picking up the ruby ring, she held it to the window, noting with dismay how it caught and refracted the light. She glanced around the room. Where could she hide it? Under the mattress? Inside her pillowcase? Opening the bottom drawer, she slipped the ring into the pocket of an old dress tucked beneath some newer ones.

At least Agnes hadn't noticed the white handkerchief under the ring, with Cecil's cursive initials – *C. F. W.* for Cecil Frederic Whitstone – and the distinctive family crest embroidered onto a corner. Evangeline tucked the handkerchief in the waistband of her undergarments and went about cleaning up the mess.

Mrs Whitstone materialised in the library while the children were taking turns reading aloud from a primer. They looked up in surprise. It wasn't like their mother to show up unannounced during their lessons.

'Miss Stokes,' she said in an unusually high-handed tone, 'please conclude the lesson as expediently as you can and meet me in the drawing room. Ned, Beatrice – Mrs Grimsby has prepared a special pudding. As soon as you are done you may make your way to the kitchen.'

The children exchanged curious glances.

'But Miss Stokes always takes us downstairs for tea,' Ned said.

His mother gave him a thin smile. 'I am quite sure you can find the way on your own.'

'Are we being punished?' Ned asked.

'Certainly not.'

'Is Miss Stokes?' Beatrice asked.

'What a ridiculous question.'

Evangeline felt a tingle of dread.

'Did Mrs Grimsby make a sponge cake?'

'You'll find out soon enough.'

Mrs Whitstone left the library. Evangeline took a deep breath. 'Let's finish this section, shall we?' she said, but her heart wasn't in it, and anyway the children were distracted, thinking about the cake. When Ned reached the end of his sing-songy recitation of a paragraph about boating, she smiled and said, 'All right, children, that's enough. You may run along to your tea.'

There it was: the ruby ring, sparkling in the glow of the whale-oil lamps in the gloomy drawing room. Mrs Whitstone held it out in front of her like a treasure-hunt find. 'Where did you get this?'

Evangeline twisted the corner of her apron, an old habit from childhood. 'I didn't steal it, if that's your implication.'

'I'm not implying anything. I'm asking a question.'

Evangeline heard a noise behind her and turned, startled at the sight of a constable standing in the shadows behind a chair. His moustache drooped. He wore a black fitted waistcoat and a truncheon in a holster; in his hands were a notebook and pencil.

'Sir,' she said, curtsying slightly. Her heart was

beating so loudly she feared he could hear it.

He inclined his head, marking something in the notebook.

‘This ring was found in your possession,’ Mrs Whitstone said.

‘You – you went into my room.’

‘You are in the employ of this household. It is not your room.’

Evangeline had no answer to that.

‘Agnes spied it on the dresser when she went to check on you. As you know. And then you hid it.’ Holding up the ring again, Mrs Whitstone looked past Evangeline towards the constable. ‘This ring is my husband’s property.’

‘It isn’t. It belongs to Cecil,’ Evangeline blurted.

The constable looked back and forth between the two women. ‘Cecil?’

Mrs Whitstone gave Evangeline a sharp look. ‘The younger Mr Whitstone. My stepson.’

‘Would you agree that this is your stepson’s ring?’ His moustache twitched under his bulbous nose when he spoke.

With a pinched smile, Mrs Whitstone said, ‘It belonged to my husband’s mother. There is a question, perhaps, about whether the ring now belongs to my husband or to his son. It most certainly does not belong to Miss Stokes.’

‘He gave it to me,’ Evangeline said.

Only a few days earlier, Cecil had pulled a small blue velvet box from his pocket and rested it on her knee. ‘Open it.’

She'd looked at him in surprise. A ring box. Could it be? Impossible, of course, and yet . . . She allowed herself a small surge of hope. Wasn't he always telling her that she was more beautiful, more charming, cleverer than any woman in his circle? Wasn't he always saying that he didn't give a fig about his family's expectations for him or society's silly moral judgements?

When she'd opened the lid, her breath caught in her throat: a band of gold, ornately filigreed, rose in four curved prongs to support a deep red stone.

'My grandmother's ruby,' he told her. 'She bequeathed it to me when she died.'

'Oh, Cecil. It's stunning. But are you—'

'Oh, no, no! Let's not get ahead of ourselves,' he'd said with a small laugh. 'For now, just seeing it on your finger is enough.'

When he extracted the ring from its slot in the cushion and slipped it onto her finger, the gesture had felt both thrillingly intimate and strangely constricting. She'd never worn one before; her father, a vicar, did not believe in adornments. Gently Cecil bent his head to her hand and kissed it. Then he snapped shut the velvet box, slipped it back into the pocket of his waistcoat, and withdrew a white handkerchief. 'Tuck the ring into this and hide it away until I return from holiday. It will be our secret.'

Now, in the drawing room with the constable, Mrs Whitstone snorted. 'That's ridiculous. Why in the world would Cecil ever give you . . .' Her voice trailed off. She stared at Evangeline.

Evangeline realised that she had said too much. *It will be our secret.* But Cecil wasn't here. She felt desperate, trapped.

And now, in defending herself, she had given away the real secret.

'Where is the younger Mr Whitstone now?' the constable asked.

'Abroad,' said Mrs Whitstone, at the same time that Evangeline said, 'Venice.'

'An attempt could be made to contact him,' the constable said. 'Do you have an address?'

Mrs Whitstone shook her head. 'That will not be necessary.' Crossing her arms, she said, 'It's obvious the girl is lying.'

The constable raised an eyebrow. 'Is there a history of lying?'

'I have no idea. Miss Stokes has only been with us a few months.'

'Five,' Evangeline said. Summoning her strength, she turned to face the constable. 'I've done my best to educate Mrs Whitstone's children and help shape their moral character. I've never been accused of anything.'

Mrs Whitstone gave a dry little laugh. 'So she says.'

'Easy enough to find out,' the constable said.

'I did not steal the ring,' Evangeline said. 'I swear it.'

The constable tapped the notebook with his pencil. 'Noted.'

Mrs Whitstone gave Evangeline a cold, appraising look. 'The truth is, I've had my suspicions about this girl for some time. She comes and goes at odd

hours of the day and night. She's secretive. The housemaids find her aloof. And now we know why. She stole a family heirloom and thought she would get away with it.'

'Would you be willing to testify to that effect?'

'Certainly.'

Evangeline's stomach dropped. 'Please,' she begged the constable, 'could we wait for Cecil's return?'

Mrs Whitstone turned on her with a scowl. 'I will not tolerate this inappropriate familiarity. He is Mr Whitstone to you.'

The constable twitched his moustache. 'I believe I have what I need, Miss Stokes. You may go. I've a few more questions for the lady of the house.'

Evangeline looked from one to the other. Mrs Whitstone raised her chin. 'Wait in your room. I'll send someone for you presently.'

If there was any question in Evangeline's mind about the gravity of her predicament, the answer made itself clear soon enough.

On her way down the stairs to the servants' quarters, she encountered various members of the household staff, all of whom nodded soberly or looked away. The assistant butler gave her a wincing smile. As she was passing the room Agnes shared with another housemaid on the landing between two staircases, the door opened and Agnes stepped out. She blanched when she saw Evangeline and tried to duck past, but Evangeline grabbed her arm.

'What are ye doing?' Agnes hissed. 'Let go of me.'

Evangeline glanced around the hallway and, seeing no one, pushed Agnes back into the room and closed the door. ‘You took that ring from my room. You had no right.’

‘No right to retrieve stolen property? To the contrary, it was me duty.’

‘It wasn’t stolen.’ She twisted Agnes’s arm, making the maid wince. ‘You know that, Agnes.’

‘I don’t know anything except what I saw.’

‘It was a gift.’

‘An heirloom, ye said. A lie.’

‘It *was* a gift.’

Agnes shook her off. “‘It *was* a gift,’” she mimicked. ‘Ye dimwit. That’s only half the trouble. Yer *pregnant*.’ She laughed at Evangeline’s befuddled expression. ‘Surprised, are ye? Too innocent to know it, but not too innocent to do the act.’

Pregnant. The moment the word was out of Agnes’s mouth, Evangeline knew she was right. The nausea, her recent inexplicable fatigue . . .

‘I had a moral responsibility to inform the lady of the house,’ Agnes said, smugly self-righteous.

Cecil’s velvet words. His insistent fingers and dazzling smile. Her own weakness, her gullibility. How pathetic, how foolish, she had been. How could she have allowed herself to be so compromised? Her good name was all she had. Now she had nothing.

‘Ye think you’re better than the rest of us, don’t ye? Well, you’re not. And now you’ve had your comeuppance,’ Agnes said, reaching for the doorknob and wrenching the door open. ‘Everyone

knows. You're the laughing stock of the household.' She pushed past Evangeline towards the stairs, knocking her back against the wall.

Desperation rose within Evangeline like a wave, filling her with such force and velocity that she was helpless against it. Without thinking, she followed Agnes out onto the landing and shoved her, hard. With a strange, high-pitched yelp, Agnes fell headlong down the stairs, crumpling in a heap at the bottom.

Peering down at Agnes as she staggered to her feet, Evangeline felt her fury crest and subside. In its wake was a faint tremor of regret.

The butler and head footman were on the scene within seconds.

'She – she tried to kill me!' Agnes cried, holding her head.

Standing at the top of the landing, Evangeline was eerily, strangely, calm. She smoothed her apron, tucked a wispy strand of hair behind an ear. As if watching a play, she noted the butler's contemptuous grimace and Agnes's theatrical sobs. Observed Mrs Grimsby flutter over, squeaking and exclaiming.

This was the end of Blenheim Road, she knew, of primers and white chalk and slate tablets, of Ned and Beatrice babbling about sponge cake, of her small bedroom with its tiny window. Of Cecil's hot breath on her neck. There would be no explaining, no redeeming. Maybe it was better this way – to be an active participant in her demise rather than a passive victim. At least now she deserved her fate.

* * *

In the servants' hallway, lighted with oil lamps, two constables fastened Evangeline into handcuffs and leg chains while the constable with the droopy moustache made the rounds of the household staff with his notebook. 'She were awful quiet,' the chambermaid was saying, as if Evangeline were already gone. Each of them, it seemed to her, overplayed the roles expected of them: the staff a little too indignant, the constables self-important, Agnes understandably giddy at the attention and apparent sympathy of her superiors.

Evangeline was still wearing her blue worsted wool uniform and white apron. She was allowed to bring nothing else with her. Her hands shackled in front of her, her legs shuffling in irons, she required two constables to guide her up the narrow back stairs to the ground-floor servants' entrance. They had to practically lift her into the prison carriage.

It was a cold, rainy evening in March. The carriage was dank and smelt, oddly, of wet sheep. The open windows had vertical iron bars but no glass. Evangeline sat on a rough wooden plank next to the constable with the droopy moustache and across from the other two, both of whom were staring at her. She wasn't sure if they were leering or simply curious.

As the coachman readied the horses, Evangeline leant forward to look at the house one last time. Mrs Whitstone was standing at the front window, holding the lace curtain back with her hand. When Evangeline caught her eye, she dropped the curtain and retreated into the depths of the parlour.

The horses lurched forward. Evangeline braced herself against the seat, trying futilely to keep the leg irons from cutting into her ankles as the carriage swayed and rattled along the cobblestones.

The day she'd first arrived by hackney cab to St John's Wood had also been cold and drizzling. Standing on the front step of the creamy white terraced house on Blenheim Road – its number, 22, in black metal, its front door a shiny vermilion – she'd taken a deep breath. The leather valise she clasped in one hand held all she possessed in the world: three muslin dresses, a nightcap and two sleeping shifts, an assortment of undergarments, a horsehair brush and washing cloth, and a small collection of books – her father's Bible with his handwritten notes; her Latin, Greek and mathematics catechisms; and a dog-eared copy of *The Tempest*, the only play she'd ever seen performed, at an outdoor festival by a travelling troupe that passed through Tunbridge Wells one summer.

She adjusted her hat and rang the bell, listening to it trill inside the house.

No response.

She pushed the buzzer again. Just as she was wondering if she had the wrong day, the door opened and a young man appeared. His brown eyes were lively and curious. His brown hair, thick and slightly curly, draped over the collar of his untucked white shirt. He wore no cravat or tailcoat. Clearly this was not the butler.

‘Yes?’ he said with an air of impatience. ‘Can I help you?’

‘Well, I – I’m . . .’ Remembering herself, she curtsied. ‘Pardon, sir. Perhaps I should return later.’

He observed her, as if from a distance. ‘Are you expected?’

‘I thought so, yes.’

‘By whom?’

‘The lady of the house. Sir. Mrs Whitstone. I’m Evangeline Stokes, the new governess.’

‘Really. Are you quite sure?’

‘P-pardon?’ she stammered.

‘I had no idea governesses came in this shape,’ he said, sweeping his hand towards her with a flourish. ‘Bloody unfair. Mine looked nothing like you.’

Evangeline felt conspicuously dumb, as if she were performing in a play and had forgotten her lines. In her role as vicar’s daughter, she used to stand a step behind her father, greeting parishioners before and after the service, accompanying him on visits to the sick and infirm. She met all sorts of people, from basket-makers to wheelwrights, carpenters to blacksmiths. But she’d had little contact with the wealthy, who tended to worship in their own chapels with their own kind. She had scant experience with the slippery humour of the upper classes and was unskilled at banter.

‘I’m just having a bit of fun.’ The young man smiled, holding out his hand. Tentatively she took it. ‘Cecil Whitstone. Half-brother to your charges. I daresay you’ll have your hands full.’ He opened the door wide. ‘I’m standing in for Trevor, who is no doubt off

fulfilling some caprice of my stepmother's. Come in, come in. I'm on the way out, but I'll announce you.'

When she stepped into the black-and-white tiled foyer, clutching her valise, Cecil craned his neck out the door. 'No more bags?'

'This is it.'

'My word, you travel light.'

At that moment, the door at the other end of the hall opened and a dark-haired woman who appeared to be in her mid thirties emerged, tying on a green silk bonnet. 'Ah, Cecil!' she said. 'And this must be, I assume, Miss Stokes?' She gave Evangeline a distracted smile. 'I'm Mrs Whitstone. It's a little chaotic today, I'm afraid. Trevor is helping Matthew harness the horses so I can go into town.'

'We all do double duty around here,' Cecil told Evangeline conspiratorially, as if they were old friends. 'In addition to teaching Latin you'll soon be plucking geese and polishing silver.'

'Nonsense,' Mrs Whitstone said, straightening her bonnet in a large gilt mirror. 'Cecil, will you inform Agnes that Miss Stokes has arrived?' Turning back to Evangeline, she said, 'Agnes will show you to your quarters. Suppertime for the servants is at five o'clock. You'll take your meals with them if the children's lessons are finished in time. You look a little peaked, dear. Why don't you have a rest before supper.'

It was a statement, not a question.

When Mrs Whitstone left, Cecil gave Evangeline a sly smile. "'Peaked" is not the word I would've used.' He stood closer to her than felt quite proper.

Evangeline felt the unfamiliar sensation of her heart thumping in her chest. ‘Should you . . . um . . . let Agnes know I’m here?’

He tapped his chin, as if considering this. Then he said, ‘My errands can wait. I’ll take you around myself. It will be my pleasure.’

How might things have turned out differently if Evangeline had followed Mrs Whitstone’s instructions – or, for that matter, her own instincts? Had she not realised the ground beneath her feet was so unstable that it might crumble at the slightest misstep?

She had not. Smiling at Cecil, she tucked a stray piece of hair back into her bun. ‘That would be lovely,’ she said.

Now, sitting in the draughty carriage, she moved her shackled wrists to the left side of her body and rubbed the place beneath her petticoat where she’d tucked the monogrammed handkerchief. With the fingers of one hand she traced its faint outline, imagining she could feel the thread of Cecil’s initials intertwined with the family crest – a lion, serpent and crown.

It was all she had, would ever have, of him. Except, apparently, for the child growing inside her.

The carriage made its way west, towards the river. No one spoke in the chilly compartment. Without realising what she was doing, Evangeline inched closer to the solid warmth of the constable next to her. Glancing down, he curled his lip and shifted towards the window, widening the space between them.

Evangeline felt a prickle of shock. She had never in her life experienced a man's revulsion. She'd taken for granted the small gifts of kindness and solicitude that came her way: the butcher who gave her choice cuts of meat, the baker who saved her the last loaf.

Slowly it dawned on her: she was about to learn what it was like to be contemptible.