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heat of passion, he
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ANGELFIRE

***Linda Lael
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In the dark stable, Jamie's white teeth flashed in a smile shadowed by the night and by the brim of his leather hat . . .

"Going out for a ride, are you?" he asked.

He reached out and rested his hands on Bliss's waist. In the next instant, he pulled her close and bent his head to brush her lips with his own.

The sensation was tantalizing, delicious, and completely frightening. Bliss felt her breasts, hidden beneath her coat and dress, meet the hard contours of Jamie's chest. "I—I was going to America," Bliss said lamely, her mouth still touching Jamie's. His laugh was gruff and gentle.

"It really would be simpler if you just let me go," she told him, as the tip of his tongue played at the corners of her mouth and promised other mysterious pleasures. Jamie lifted Bliss slightly and pulled her forward, so that she was pressed against him. She made a soft whimpering sound as he kissed her at last, thoroughly and with all the passion of a husband about to claim his rights. A trembling began in Bliss's thighs and spread to her knees, which would barely support her. Jamie caught her as she sagged toward the floor, whisking her deftly up into his arms.

"It would serve you right if I made love to you right here," he vowed huskily . . .

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In both *MOONFIRE* and *ANGELFIRE*, I have tampered with history by extending the transportation of criminals from the British Isles to Australia by some twenty years, this being necessary to the stories.

Reeve, Maggie, Jamie, Bliss, and I all beg your kind indulgence.

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Prologue

Near Brisbane, Australia—*December*
1872

THE BARK OF THE ACACIA TREE FELT ROUGH AGAINST THE INSIDES of Jamie McKenna's wrists and the midday sun burned hot, scalding his bare back. Resting his forehead against the tree trunk to which he was bound, he closed his eyes and fought back the panic that threatened to engulf him. And he waited. That was the worst part, the waiting.

"Jamie?" The feminine voice came from behind him. "I brought you some water."

Jamie opened his eyes, and his jawline hardened. "You shouldn't 'ave come, lass," he said. His voice sounded hoarse, hurting as it emerged from his dry throat.

Peony came to stand boldly beside him, her enormous green eyes filled with sadness. "I have a knife," she whispered. "I'll cut that rope and we'll escape, the two of us together."

In view of what was to come, the idea was not without appeal, but Jamie knew that the master would find them if they tried running away. The punishment for such flagrant rebellion would be that much worse, and it would include Peony. "No," he said.

Tears welling in her eyes, Peony opened a canteen and

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lifted it to Jamie's parched lips. She was a beautiful woman, with her emerald eyes and golden hair. At twenty-five, she was eight years older than Jamie, and she belonged to Increase Pipher as surely as his favorite horse and the gold-handled walking cane he carried.

"I can't bear this," she choked out.

The water was sweet in Jamie's mouth and it soothed his throat as he swallowed. "You've got to get out of 'ere before someone sees you," he muttered.

"At least let me set you free," Peony pleaded, clutching at Jamie's arm with one hand. Although she was agitated, her touch was cool, soothing.

"Do you know what Pipher'd do if he caught you?" he countered, in a whisper gruff with fear. "I'll tell you, Peony: he'd do just what he's going to do to me now—tie you to a tree and 'ave you whipped."

Peony squeezed her eyes shut. Her slender alabaster throat worked, but no sound came out of her mouth.

"Go," Jamie said. "Please."

The rumble of male voices rolled on the muggy summer air like thunder preceding a storm. They were coming, the wait was over.

Jamie steeled himself for the ordeal he would face, determined to get through it without giving Pipher the satisfaction of breaking him. "Run, Peony," he rasped, and after a moment's hesitation, she disappeared into the trees that surrounded the small clearing.

Pipher and his men arrived seconds after the woman had gone. Jamie refused to turn his head to look back at the man who had enslaved him; the old man was forced to come and stand at his side.

Pipher smiled, showing his enormous yellow teeth—horse's teeth, Peony called them—and the sun glinted in his snow-white hair and muttonchop whiskers. "Hello, lad," he said, in a voice that could only have been described as cordial.

Jamie glared at his tormenter, knowing that Pipher

wanted him to beg, telling him by his expression and his bearing that he'd die first.

The plantation owner threw back his head and laughed, and Jamie felt a fine mist of saliva settle on his skin.

"God, but you're a stubborn little mick!" the old man marveled.

Increase looked back at his henchmen, who twittered halfheartedly at his subtle cue. Jamie knew some of those men pitied him, but instead of feeling any kinship with them, he hated the lot.

Pipher lifted his cane, with its handle of beautifully molded gold, and tapped Jamie's shoulder with it. "Where's that quick tongue of yours now, Mr. McKenna?" he asked, his foul breath fanning over Jamie's face and causing bile to rise in his throat.

Jamie swallowed and said nothing, and his gaze remained steady, defiant. His message was clear enough, he knew. It said: *Go to hell*. And Pipher understood.

"The whip," the planter grated out, infuriated, extending one hand.

Someone came forward with the coil of black leather, and Pipher made a point of unfurling it with a sharp crack. He was skillful with the lash; even when there was no punishment to be meted out, he often practiced for hours at a time.

The rich man stepped back, out of sight, and again Jamie heard the whip crack. His stomach muscles tensed; he forced himself to let them go slack. The others had told him that it would hurt less that way.

The first lash weakened Jamie's knees; the pain was like fire raging across his sunburned back. He made himself think of his brother, Reeve, and of the old days in Ireland as he listened to the whip being drawn back with a *whoosh* and then heard it slicing through the thick air again.

Sweat beaded on his forehead and upper lip as the strip of leather lacerated his flesh a second time, but he did not cry out. Not one lash or a thousand could make him do that.

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He counted ten more biting slashes before the summer air went dark and his legs refused to support him any longer.

The sun was low on the horizon when Jamie regained consciousness. He was still bound to the tree, though he'd slipped to his knees, and Peony was sawing frantically at his bonds with a kitchen knife.

Jamie's back was ablaze with pain, and the tree bark had scraped one side of his face raw. His throat was all but swollen shut and the smell and taste of blood made his stomach churn. "Go—away—" he managed to croak.

Tears were streaming down Peony's cheeks. "Just shut up, Jamie McKenna," she said, still slicing at the thick rope. "We've no time to argue—I don't know if the blaze caught properly or not."

When his bonds gave way, Jamie rolled to the ground, unable to hold himself upright. He was disoriented; the earth felt spongy beneath him and the sky seemed to have fallen in, thick and smothering.

"Left you here to die, he did," Peony prattled to herself. "Boar's bait, that's what he called you. The devil's waiting for that old man in hell's front parlor, I'll tell you that." Jamie heard the knife thump against the ground, felt her efforts to lift him to his feet. "I've got a place to hide you," she said, breathing hard from the struggle, "if you'll—just—get—up!"

Nausea roiled in Jamie's stomach, so ferocious was the pain. At great cost, he turned his head away from Peony and vomited.

She stroked the back of his head until the violent spasms of sickness had ceased, then began pulling at him again and yammering, "Jamie, please—you've got to get up—you've just got to—"

"I—can't—" he rasped, willing himself to die.

As broken as he was, Jamie felt the fury surge through Peony's body just as though the two of them were linked somehow, sharing the same emotions. "I thought you had more courage than that!" she cried. "Maybe that old beg-

gar's right about you—maybe you're not worth that odd bit of brass you wear round your neck!"

The challenge gave Jamie the strength to thrust himself to his knees. He touched the beggar's badge, given to him so long ago in Dublin, and thought of Reeve and his poor lost mother. Because he knew they'd ask it of him, he battled the dizziness that swelled around him like a dark mist and then, with Peony's help, rose to his feet.

His friend supported him and, at the same time, led him. He could barely see, but the sound of crackling underbrush met his ears and he caught the scent of burnt sugar on the wind. "Where . . . ?"

"Never you mind where, Jamie McKenna," Peony replied, and there were tears in her voice. "Just never you mind. You and I are going to do what we should have done long ago—we're going to put this place behind us."

Jamie hadn't the stamina to argue that any attempt at escaping would not only be futile but perhaps fatal as well, so he leaned on Peony and allowed her to lead him away through the acacia trees and the specterlike gums.

Just when he was sure that he couldn't take another step, they reached a lean-to of some sort and Jamie sank facedown onto a bed of sweet straw. Peony bustled about, making noise, but he didn't bother to look and see what she was doing. His body and his spirit screamed for sleep.

"This is going to burn like the fires of Hades," Peony announced reluctantly, "but I've got to clean those wounds or you'll surely die of the infection."

A cry of agony exploded in Jamie's throat when she poured what felt like liquid brimstone over his lacerated back, and then, perhaps mercifully, he blacked out.

He dreamed that he was at home in Ireland, where December brought cold winds that dampened the very marrow of a man's bones. He was in the cottage off that Dublin alley, and his mother was there, stoking up the fire that guttered in the grate.

"You're a good lad," she said, over one shoulder. "Aye.

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No matter what Father McDougal says, you're a good lad, Jamie me boy."

In the dream, Jamie asked where Reeve was, and that was when his mother turned. Her face was a blank expanse of skin, with no features to be seen.

"You're a good lad, Jamie me boy," she said again. "Aye. No matter what—"

"Reeve!" the young Jamie screamed, terrified. "Reeve!"

"Hush now," scolded a gentle voice from somewhere above, in the waking world. "It's no use calling out for him. There's just you and me now, Jamie. Just you and me."

Chapter 1

New Zealand—August 1888

THE SHINY STEEL TINES OF THE PITCHFORK PLUNGED THROUGH the mixture of hay and straw in which Bliss Stafford had spent the night, missing her face by mere inches. Her eyes widened and a startled scream escaped her before she could stop it. She sat bolt upright in the haystack, spiky bits sticking in her cinnamon-colored hair and clinging to her coat. “Just what do you think you’re doing, you bloody fool!”

A tall, solidly built man with light hair and eyes the color of a summer sea was staring at her, obviously confounded. He was wearing a heavy coat of dark navy woolen, along with gloves and a floppy leather hat, and his breath made a plume in the frigid winter air.

“You nearly skewered me!” Bliss protested, struggling to her feet and dusting bits of straw from her shoulders. It is virtually impossible, she reflected to herself, to maintain a dignified manner when one has just slept in a pile of hay.

Hugging herself, she began stomping both feet in an effort to get warm. She hadn’t eaten since the morning before, when the last of the food she’d stolen from the refreshment table at Alexander’s party had run out, and her stomach rumbled loudly.

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The farmer grinned, showing pearly-white teeth. "You've got some gall, lass. This happens to be my barn you're trespassing in."

Bliss thought she heard a faint lilt of the Irish in his voice, but she considered this only briefly. There were too many other matters that needed thinking about. Such as extracting herself from this unsettling situation. She thrust out her chin and challenged, "I haven't hurt your stupid barn, now have I?"

This time, the man laughed outright. With a shake of his handsome head, he flung the pitchfork deftly into the hay. Bliss shuddered, thinking how easily she could have been pinioned to the floor of this isolated stable.

"Name's McKenna," the farmer said, turning to walk away even as he made this announcement. It was plain that he expected Bliss to follow meekly after him. Because she was hungry and cold, she could not have done otherwise, but it was irritating to comply with an order so offhand that it hadn't even been uttered aloud.

"Stafford," Bliss answered in kind, bracing herself for the winter cold as they left the relative shelter of the barn. She hadn't gotten a good look at the farm the night before, having taken shelter at a very late hour, but now she saw that it was a substantial place with a house built of white stone and sheep dotting the deep green of the hillsides. The whisper of the sea and a certain salty scent to the air told her that the water was not far away.

Mr. McKenna's boots made a crisp sound on the board steps leading up to the porch of his house. Bliss decided that with a place this size, there must surely be a Mrs. McKenna and a covey of children. The thought filled her with a vague sense of regret.

Reaching the front door, which was made of some heavy, unplanned wood, McKenna opened it and stepped back, for all the world like a gentleman might do, to let her pass ahead of him.

With a queenly lift of her chin, Bliss proceeded into the

house. The scent of meat and eggs being fried teased her nostrils and her stomach grumbled again, spoiling her attempt at nonchalance.

"Is that all the name you have, then?" Mr. McKenna asked, hanging his hat on one of several pegs beside the door. "Just Stafford?" His pale blue eyes twinkled as he shrugged out of his coat.

"Bliss," she admitted, though grudgingly. Since her flight from Alexander's party several days before, she'd been secretive about her name. Not that any great number of people had asked.

He chuckled and shook his head, in the throes of some private wonder, and then ran one hand through his hair. "Come along then, Bliss Stafford, and we'll see about quieting that stomach of yours."

She followed him, still wearing her shabby plaid coat, peering into this room and that as they passed down a wide hallway toward the back of the house. The place had a certain spartan prosperity about it; there would be few luxuries here, but nothing needful would be lacking, either.

The kitchen was spacious and filled with wintry light, and the glare dazzled Bliss so that she had to blink several times in order to see again. A lovely Maori woman was standing at the stove, cooking, and again Bliss felt a peculiar stirring of sadness.

"Found her in the barn," Mr. McKenna said, and that was his only comment. He went to the washstand in a far corner of the huge kitchen and poured water from a crockery pitcher into a basin.

Bliss felt a blush moving beneath her freckles. She smiled lamely at the cook, who responded with a pleasant look but said nothing, and Mr. McKenna made a tremendous splashing as he washed.

Feeling very self-conscious, Bliss intertwined her fingers in front of her and rocked once or twice on the worn heels of her high-button shoes. "I suppose you're wondering what I was doing sleeping in your barn," she piped, though Mr.

McKenna had not actually inquired about that peculiar occurrence. "Well, I'll be happy to tell you."

The handsome farmer rolled up the sleeves of his blue cambric workshirt and grinned. "That's good of you," he remarked as the cook added another place to the table, which had been set for one, then discreetly left the kitchen. "Won't you sit down?"

Bliss was stung by the mocking formality of the question, as well as by the courtly bow her host executed. With a sniff, she settled herself at the table, still wearing her coat. The smell of the fried meat and eggs made her light-headed, she was so hungry.

"It just so happens that I'm on my way to America," she announced, scooping food onto her plate with as much dignity as she could manage.

The ice-blue eyes were twinkling again. "An ambitious jaunt, that. What's in the States?" Mr. McKenna took what remained of the eggs and mutton, politely failing to notice that Bliss had left him relatively less to eat than one might have expected.

Bliss swallowed before answering, for even though she had spent the night in a stranger's barn and been forced by circumstances to accept what amounted to charity, her manners had not deserted her. She thought of all the glowing letters she'd received from her mother over the years, and she could hardly wait to get to the place.

"Everything," she said, in a musing, dreamy voice that would surely have brought desultory comment from Alexander—had Alexander been there, that is. She peered across the table at her benefactor, squinting a little because her eyes were tired. "Have you ever been to America?"

"Do you need spectacles?" Mr. McKenna countered, chewing.

Bliss was mildly insulted. "No, I don't," she snapped, "and it was rude of you to change the subject that way!"

He looked amused; it was obvious that he didn't care in