

ANNA  
BELFRAGE

TIMES *of*  
TURMOIL

**EXCERPT**

Time *Light*  
press



## Chapter 1

She should probably have kept her mouth shut. But Erin Melville wasn't the type of woman who turned the other way when a big, hulking brute of a man chose to punish a scrawny boy in the middle of the street. Especially not when the asshole was using a whip on the child. So she waded in.

"Stop!"

"This is no matter for you to meddle in," the man snarled, bringing the crop down in yet another vicious strike across the boy's narrow shoulders.

Erin shoved him. "He's bleeding!"

"As he should! A worthless, useless servant is what he is!"

Servant? The boy was at most twelve—or so she guessed, given his size. Too thin, the linen of his worn shirt clinging to a knobby spine and bony shoulder blades.

The man raised the crop. Erin placed herself between him and the boy.

"Move!" He was sweating, the broken veins on his nose and chin looking almost purple against the red of his skin.

"No."

"Fine," he sneered. "I dare say you've tasted a crop once or twice, hey? Once a slave—" He broke off on a yelp.

“Best not finish that,” Duncan said, blue eyes flashing. Erin smiled at her husband, received a frown in return. She sighed inwardly. *Inconspicuous*, she reminded herself, *you should always strive to be inconspicuous*. Well, so Duncan thought at any rate, hemming and hawing when he verbalised that she did not need to bring attention to the fact that she was a woman of colour. Not something to be flouted in a day and age where anyone with less than lily-white skin was suspected of being a slave, at least here in the American colonies.

In Erin’s opinion, just being a woman was something of a trial in the year 1718. There were definitely days when she longed for her other life in the twenty-first century. Until she remembered that had she not fallen through time in 2016, she’d likely have been burned to a crisp in the fire engulfing her home. Discreetly, she took a couple of deep breaths, attempting to calm her thundering pulse: a time traveller, an impossibility, that’s who she was, and should anyone find out . . . well, being a woman of colour would be a walk in the park in comparison! She swallowed, took yet another breath and redirected her attention to her husband and the man with the crop.

“There’s no hiding it, is there?” the unknown brute sneered. “Look at her: where did you find her? In one of the French colonies? After all, everyone knows those Frenchies are happy to fornicate with their slaves.”

“As are the English colonists,” Duncan retorted. “But my wife is not—has never been—a slave.”

“No? Her skin says otherwise.” The brute laughed. “Should I find her alone, I’d claim her as mine and—” Whatever he had intended to say became a loud gurgle.

“Careful,” Duncan said, releasing the man to double over and gasp for breath. “Anyone touches my wife best be prepared to meet me at dawn—to die.”

Erin tuned out the continued argument and sank down on her haunches beside the boy instead. A hand to his back reassured her he was breathing, but he was shivering violently. From the way his fists were knotted, his eyes squished shut, she guessed he was very much conscious, probably just waiting for the next blow. And the next. She frowned, encircling one bony wrist. He jerked. Sunken cheeks, deep purple shadows under his eyes, old bruises mottling what she could see of his skin—this boy was living through hell.

“He needs help,” she said, standing up. “The boy,” she continued. “We must help him.”

“We?” The big man shoved forward. “You won’t be touching my property.”

“Your property?”

“He’s indentured,” Duncan explained.

“And that allows him to mistreat him? Murder him?”

“Nay, that it does not,” a deep voice said from behind them.

Erin recognised the Welsh lilt to the voice and offered the speaker a deep curtsy. “Mr Lloyd,” she said, noting out of the corner of her eye that the big bastard scowled at the substantially smaller David Lloyd.

“I’ll not have you meddle in this,” the man growled.

“No?” Lloyd prodded the prone boy with the tip of his shoe. An elegant shoe, as black as the stockings that disappeared into black breeches that matched the black coat, the skirts falling almost to Lloyd’s knees. “I fear I must, Hyland Nelson.” He pulled himself up to his full height, which effectively had him reaching this unknown Hyland’s shoulder. “I’ve told thee before, have I not? Thou cannot mistreat an indenture like that.”

“He’s mine to do as I please with,” Hyland objected.

“Ah, but that is where thou art wrong, dear Hyland. Even an indenture has some protection under the law, and thou knowest me: I am a great believer in the law.” Lloyd rose on his toes.

“And the law says that if thou were to, let us say, maim this poor lad, permanently cripple him or, God spare us, kill him, then thou would pay the ultimate price.”

“You’d hang, Nelson,” Duncan clarified.

“He needs discipline!” Nelson roared. “He’s an ungrateful little bastard who shirks work.”

“Maybe if you fed him, he’d have the strength to work,” Erin said, receiving a warning blue look from Duncan. *What?* She crossed her arms over her chest. “That boy is starving.”

Duncan studied the child, a deep wrinkle forming between his brows.

“What is it to you?” Nelson demanded. “I’ll make sure he gets enough to survive, but more than that makes him hard to handle.”

“Ah. So thou art starving him into obedience.” Lloyd gave Nelson a disgusted look. “Most ungodly, Hyland Nelson. No, we cannot have that.”

“We can take care of him,” Erin said, leaning down to brush at the boy’s hair. He shrank from her touch, and her heart twisted.

“You?” Nelson spat. “He’s my indenture. He goes home with me.”

The boy’s tremors increased. Duncan looked first at the boy, then at Mr Lloyd. “We’ll take him home. He needs good care and food, and we can supply both.”

“I say no!” Nelson moved with the speed of a striking cobra, shoving Erin so hard she landed on her butt. His big hand closed on the boy’s arm, and he hoisted him upright. The boy yelped. Nelson whacked him across the face.

“Enough!” Lloyd roared. “So help me God, unhand the lad now, or I’ll have thee thrown in gaol for undue violence.”

Nelson sneered, but when Duncan drew his sword, he paled.

“You heard the chief justice,” Duncan said, making Mr Lloyd swell. Clearly, he was very enamoured of his new title, even if he’d never use it. Quakers did not believe in titles.

“This is wrong,” Nelson said, releasing the boy. “A man is entitled to do as it pleases him with his property.”

“Hmph! Compassion and charity, that’s what defines a good Christian man,” Lloyd said. Nelson opened his mouth, but Lloyd waved him silent. “The lad goes with Melville.” He turned to Duncan. “Would thou consider taking on his contract?”

“What? No, he is not for sale!” Nelson protested.

“Of course he isn’t; he isn’t a slave,” Lloyd retorted. “But his contract can be transferred.”

“Father?” A thinner copy of Nelson sidled up to stand beside him. In difference to his father, he had most of his hair and no paunch, but he was as wide over the shoulders, had the same small mouth and light eyes under heavy brows. Neanderthal throwbacks, the both of them, Erin reflected, mentally apologising to the poor Neanderthals for the comparison.

“Ah, Caleb,” Lloyd said.

“Mr Lloyd,” Caleb muttered, looking anything but pleased. He frowned at the boy. “What has he done this time?” he sighed.



“Dropped the eggs,” Nelson said. “On purpose, of course.”

“Oh, of course.” Caleb sniffed. “Nothing but trouble, that one.”

“Well, how fortunate he will no longer be thy burden,” Lloyd said.

“Eh?” Caleb said.

“They mean to steal our property, son.” Nelson pointed at Erin. “It’s that uppity former slave’s—aah!” He staggered back, covering his face. He scowled at Duncan. “My nose,” he said.

“You broke my nose!”

“And you insulted my wife. Again,” Duncan said.

“You’ll pay for this!” Nelson said.

“Aye,” Caleb filled in. “We’ll not have it, that someone harms us over a coloured—”

“Careful,” Lloyd said. “Erin Melville is a much-appreciated member of Chester’s society and a generous donor to our various charities. I’ll not have her maligned by men who’d have done better to stay down south in New Castle.”

Caleb bristled. “We’re free to go wherever it pleases us!”

“As long as thou respect the laws,” Lloyd said. “Up here, we do not hold with inhumane treatment of our fellow man.”

“Fellow man? Him?” Caleb pointed at the boy and laughed. “The son of a whore—”

With a keening sound, the boy leapt at him, teeth bared. Duncan grabbed him round the waist and pulled him back, which had the poor boy hissing in pain.

“See? A wild, dangerous creature,” Caleb said, pressing a handkerchief to the scratch marks on his cheek.

“I wonder why,” Erin said. “You treat someone like a beast, don’t be surprised if they become one.”

“Aye.” Lloyd nodded. “As we sow, we reap,” he added primly. “But as of now, this young lad is no longer thy concern. I will—”

Both the Nelsons broke out in loud protests. Lloyd stood on his toes, filled his lungs and roared. “Quiet!”

By now, they’d drawn quite a crowd, and to judge from the looks the Nelsons were getting, they weren’t much liked by the people of Chester, most of whom, like David Lloyd, were law-abiding Quakers.

“Duncan Melville will buy the contract,” Lloyd said in his normal voice. “Today.”

Much later, Hans guided the cart down the lane of the Papegoja estate. Tall and fair and disinclined to say much beyond yes or no, Hans Muller was a German who’d come to America after war had robbed him of his entire family.

Duncan had bought his indenture contract, and over the last few years he’d become an adopted member of the Melville

family and was extremely protective of Erin and Esther, Duncan's much younger stepsister. He was also the shocked but proud godfather of the Melville twins, two lively girls who'd recently mastered the art of walking, thereby upgrading from cute and adorable to cute and mercurial.

Duncan had ridden beside them in silence all the way from Chester. After her attempts at conversation had been stonewalled, Erin ignored him and instead concentrated her attentions on the boy—Tim, he'd mumbled—who was back to shivering uncontrollably, his shirt streaked with drying blood.

Hans carried the boy inside.

Erin made as if to follow but was stopped by Duncan's hand on her arm. "Those Nelsons make nasty enemies," he said. "They'll not take this lying down."

"But you paid them," she said.

"A transaction they'll claim was done under duress." He shrugged, handing the reins of his horse to one of the stable boys. "I hope he was worth it." With that he strode off.

She stuck her tongue out at his retreating back. What was eating him?

Inside, Mrs Andersson and Esther were already busy with Tim, Hans standing silently to the side to help lift and turn as needed.

“Poor child!” Mrs Andersson said in an undertone. “Look at him! A walking scarecrow!”

It had taken Erin some time to warm to Mrs Andersson, very much due to her shrill voice. Klara Andersson was well into her fifties but had an unlined pink complexion, big brown eyes, and a plump mouth that was presently pursed as she studied Tim, laid out on the huge kitchen table.

To her credit, Mrs Andersson had never once commented on Erin’s evident mixed heritage. She’d swallowed Duncan’s story—complete with a now deceased sea captain, a.k.a. Erin’s father; a dark, exotic beauty said sea captain had come upon during his extensive travels and fallen in love with; and a rich but orphaned heiress, i.e. Erin herself—and had never questioned it.

But then, Mrs Andersson tended to think the sun shone out of Duncan’s arse, especially after he’d told her his great-grandfather was Swedish. Mrs Andersson could go on for hours about her own Swedish ancestry—her mother had arrived in the colony of New Sweden as a babe, and while Mrs Andersson had never set foot in distant Sweden, she claimed she was as Swedish as they came, which was sort of amusing as her father had been from Sussex.

“Bless his good heart,” she now said, hurrying over to the hearth and the pot that always held hot water.

“Eh?”

“Master Duncan,” Mrs Andersson said. “So in keeping with his generous character to open his home to an unfortunate orphan.”

“Hmm,” was all Erin said, noting how the oh-so-kind Master Melville paused at the door to the kitchen for an instant before disappearing in the direction of his study.

Esther winked at Erin. She found Mrs Andersson’s adoration of Duncan hilarious. Erin rolled her eyes in response but couldn’t stop herself from smiling at her very young sister-in-law. Everyone smiled at Esther—she had that effect on people. She was one of those sunny personalities who effortlessly memorised names and faces, who was as welcome in their tenant farmers’ homes as in the grander houses of their neighbours.

The young men in Chester County gravitated towards her like flies to a honeypot. No wonder because, at sixteen, Esther Connor was a delectable collection of curves and youthful energy, the blue eyes she shared with Duncan fringed by thick lashes as fair as her hair. She was also an extremely capable young woman, as at home milking a cow as preserving fruit or mending clothes or working in the kitchen garden.

Most of all, she was a beloved baby sister to both Duncan and Erin, which resulted in Duncan being overprotective. Plus,

should anything happen to Esther, Duncan's not-so-loving mother would skin him alive.

Conversation ground to a halt as the three women focused on Tim. The long benches on either side of the table were shoved aside. Esther lit every tallow candle she could find, creating a dim and smoky haze of light around the poor boy's bleeding body. An hour or so later, a clean and shorn Tim was carried up the stairs by Hans. He looked groggy, a consequence of the laudanum Mrs Andersson had added to the warm milk she'd had him drink before starting on his lacerated back.

Esther swept together Tim's hair and ragged clothes and threw them into the hearth. For an instant, the unpleasant smell of singed hair filled the kitchen.

"Gone," Esther pronounced. She peered at the floor. "Not a single louse in sight."

"Best make sure," Mrs Andersson said, calling for Julie, one of the maids, to scrub the floor. "Properly, mind," she added, wagging a finger.

Erin chose to escape the busy kitchen, going in search of her girls.

She found them clambering all over their father. Duncan had Ellen on his lap while Sandy—short for Alexandra—was trying to climb up his arm. And yet, despite being more or less attacked by their offspring, he looked ridiculously happy.

She could still remember the first time he had seen them. He'd burst through the door to their bedroom, his hair mussed, his eyes huge.

"Twins," she'd told him proudly, feeling as if she'd spent the last few hours in a cement mixer.

"What?"

Alice Williams, the local midwife, had smiled. "Two girls."

"Girls?" His voice shook. "We have two daughters?"

The midwife had handed him one of the infants, and Erin had watched her big, strong husband trace the baby's features with a trembling finger. Then he'd lifted his face to look at Erin.

"Thank you," he'd said, leaning forward to press butterfly kisses to her nose, her eyes, her mouth. "Thank you," he'd repeated, kissing the daughter he was holding before gesturing for the midwife to hand him the other baby. "My babies," he'd crooned, "my little treasures, my princesses."

She smiled at the memory, was about to say something to Duncan when he noticed her. He frowned.

"Finished doing your good deed for the day?" he asked.

"He's in bed," she replied, sitting down in the chair facing his desk. Duncan's study was a study in polished wood. Here, she'd chosen to keep the original wainscoting in dark oak, the plastered wall a nice contrasting cream. Dark beams in the ceiling, a dark wooden floor laid in a pleasing herringbone

pattern and adorned with a small round rug Mrs Andersson—of course, who else—had woven for the master. The desk had come with the house, whimsically adorned with an elegantly carved parrot and the initials *JP* at the top of each leg. Other than the two candles on the desk, the small space was lit by the reddish glow from the hearth, the mantelpiece adorned with a further two silver candlesticks.

Duncan just nodded, going back to his antics with their daughters.

“You’re mad at me,” she stated.

“Mad? Aye, that fits. What were you thinking of, to—”

“Stop a man beating a child to death? I don’t know, maybe I felt it was my obligation to do something?” She crossed her arms. “Or are you saying it would have been better if I’d just ignored it?”

“Yes!”

“Yes?”

“Damnation, woman. Of course I don’t condone a man beating a young lad to pulp, but why did it have to be you meddling?”

“Because no one else did, you moron. Not even you!”

By now, both girls had gone very still, two pairs of identical blue eyes darting from Erin to Duncan.



“I would have,” he said in a lower voice. “Surely, you don’t believe me to be such an insensitive bastard?” His mouth twisted into a bitter smile. He rarely referred to himself as a bastard—probably because he was one, and a very, very unwanted child at that.

“So why are you so angry?”

“Why? Because now that damned Nelson has you in his sights.”

“What? Why would he—”

“You humiliated him, Erin.”

“No more than you did—or Lloyd.” She clasped her hands together. Hyland Nelson on a mission to make her pay was a very disturbing thought.

“But it is at you he’ll direct his anger, at the uppity coloured woman who spoke to him as if she were his equal.” He held up a hand. “Yes, yes, of course you’re his equal, but that’s not how he sees it.”

“No one here does,” she said bitterly. She turned away, staring unseeing through the window. Outside, the January day was shading into night, and there’d be no electric light to illuminate the shadows. She sighed.

Warm arms drew her close, her nose pressed against the linen shirt that smelled so reassuringly of him. “I do,” he said softly. “I do, my Erin.”



## Chapter 2

It took several weeks for Tim's bruises to fade. The bleeding lines on his back scabbed and healed, and by the time they were halfway through February, a fuzz of fair hair had sprouted to adorn his head. In clean and whole clothes, he looked almost like a normal lad, but in difference to other bairns, Tim did not talk. In fact, he made very little noise, moving like a veritable ghost through the house. Most of his time he spent with the horses, happy to spend hours seeing to the beasts. Other than that, he avoided them all—well, except for their wee lasses, who expected nothing of him but that he be there, offering a hand to hold, a lap to clamber into. Even with them, he did not speak.

“He understands everything,” Erin said, handing Duncan a bowl of oatmeal.

“Aye.” Duncan frowned. Was Tim mayhap impaired in some way?

Erin served herself. “Maybe he just doesn't have anything to say.” She slid in to sit on the bench closest to his chair.

“Hmm.” He helped himself to salt and butter.

“Well, some people are like that: they only speak when so required.”

He smiled at her. “Not like you, then.”

“Or you.” She stooped and pressed a quick kiss to his forehead. “You’re the lawyer, remember? And when you’re in court, all you do is talk, talk, talk.”

“Mostly, I write,” he said. He studied his fingers, presently permanently stained with ink. These days, he was swamped in work, courtesy of David Lloyd. The powerful and astute former attorney general, now chief justice, who had—or so Duncan had inferred from Lloyd’s casual comments—more or less single-handedly drafted the present Frame of Government for the colony of Pennsylvania, was a busy man, always involved in furthering Pennsylvania’s independence from its owner, William Penn.

Rumour had it that Penn was mightily displeased with the restrictions of his powers, but Penn was in England and not really in a position to do much to regain personal control. Better that way, as Duncan was of the opinion Lloyd and his supporters would fight tooth and nail to defend their liberties. Fight verbally, that is. After all, Quakers did not hold with violence.

Duncan had met Lloyd a couple of years ago, and the older man had taken an immediate liking to Duncan, suggesting repeatedly that Duncan stand for election to the General Assembly and join him in furthering Pennsylvania’s development. Just as repeatedly, Duncan had politely said no,

insisting he did not have the time to invest in such a demanding undertaking.

“You keep me too busy,” he’d said to Lloyd when last the issue had come up. “And truth be told, I much prefer helping you draft laws and such. I have no interest in a public life.”

He glanced at his wife, talking intently with Mrs Andersson while feeding Ellen from her own bowl of oatmeal. Public life would require public appearances, and his Erin would likely not fare well under the myopic public eye of the Philadelphia worthies. She was safer here, albeit quite isolated. Other than Esther, Mrs Anderson and their female tenants, Erin had few interactions with women, leading a life that must feel suffocating to someone used to having the entire world at her fingertips.

He smiled slightly, recalling his own fascination with the internet and laptops. Well, not at first: initially, he had been terrified at finding himself in this utterly strange and foreign time, a time of inventions such as cars and—what was it called? Ah, yes, television—and electricity and hot showers. Once over his initial shock at having been transported through time by a violent thunderstorm, he had been amazed by the sheer comfort of that future life. Had he been allowed to choose, he’d have preferred to remain in Erin’s time, but fate had other plans, and so here they were, his Erin forced to adapt to an existence in

which she was but an extension of him. There were days when she missed being “an independent woman,” as she phrased it, which was why he’d been more than happy to allow her to indulge herself in rebuilding their home. Erin was a skilled carpenter, had learned the craft from her grandfather in a time when women could become anything they wanted. Not that Erin had ever seen carpentry as a future profession, more as a “hobby,” and a right fanciful concept that was.

A quick kiss and passing pat to his wife’s rear and Duncan retired to his study. A little island of solitude—as long as he kept the door closed, thereby stopping Sandy and Ellen from entering—in a busy household. He enjoyed the quiet, the rustling of thick paper, the smell of ink and hot wax.

When he’d acquired the Papegoja estate—in itself unusual here in Pennsylvania, where William Penn owned the vast majority of the land himself, renting it out to the eager colonists—he’d had notions of dividing his time between his work for the Graham Trading Company and managing his extensive new land holdings, but truth be told, he much preferred the work Lloyd sent his way to farming.

While he could handle both scythe and axe, drive a pair of oxen and spend hours in a sawpit if so required, his heart wasn’t in such. Aye, he often took part, lending his strength to the heavier tasks, but he was happy to delegate the day-to-day to

the taciturn Sivert Andersson, husband to the rosy Mrs Andersson. Sivert, to Mrs Andersson's obvious pride, was as Swedish as they came, having arrived in Pennsylvania a mere forty years ago when his father was sent out to serve as the minister of the Swedish Lutheran Church.

Andersson had capable help in Hans, who'd silently assumed the role of second-in-command. What on earth they'd do without Hans, Duncan had no idea. Over the last few years, the huge German had become a permanent fixture in their lives.

And now they had Tim. He pursed his mouth as he considered his recent run-in with the Nelsons, father and son, when he'd been to Chester yesterday. Right uncomfortable that, both Nelson's spouting invectives and threats. He wasn't worried on his own account—they'd be fools to pick a fight with him—but Erin was another matter entirely. Not that she ever went anywhere on her own, but to judge from Hyland Nelson's parting remark, they knew where the Melvilles lived, and who knew what foolishness they might attempt? He made a mental note to talk with Hans about this potential threat and retrieved Tim's contract from his satchel, now duly signed by both himself and Lloyd, acting as a witness.

Such a sad little thing, this scrap of paper which sold a lad estimated to be around three into servitude for twenty years so that the captain who'd carried him across the seas could recoup

both on his passage and that of his dead mother. Nine years ago, that was, making Tim twelve or thereabouts. He disliked the notion of selling children into indentureship—they were too young to be subjected to such—but things were as they were. Well, at least Tim was in a better place now than he'd been a fortnight ago.

He tucked away Tim's contract and drew some of the documents Lloyd had given him closer. "It won't come to anything," Lloyd had said as he'd handed them over. "But I thought it best you see them."

Not come to anything? Duncan sat stunned once he'd finished reading. *No white man to enter into common-law marriage with a coloured woman on the risk of being forced into indentureship. No white man to wed a coloured woman on the risk of being enslaved together with his wife and any offspring. No person of colour to . . .* Angrily, he shoved the papers aside. He had moved to Pennsylvania specifically because laws such as these had made it impossible to remain in Maryland.

"Laws cannot be applied retroactively," Lloyd has said yesterday, speaking of an entirely different matter, but should this inflamed drivel become law, Duncan had no choice but to take his family and leave. But go where? He considered the map that decorated one of his walls, the various trading routes of the Graham Trading Company marked in red.



He'd have to think long and hard about this and come up with some sort of plan. And until he did, he'd not tell Erin—no need to frighten her unnecessarily. But there was someone who could help: Uncle David. Yes, David Graham would have some notions as to what to do, or rather where best to go. Buoyed by that insight, he sharpened his quill and began a long letter to his uncle, starting with a brief summary of his recent successes on behalf of the trading company he owned a sizeable percentage of.

“Philadelphia? In this weather?” Erin threw a look out the window. It was raining, one of those incessant downpours that could continue an entire day.

“You know Lloyd. Once he needs something, he expects it immediately.” Duncan finished packing his satchel. “I don't like it,” he added, “leaving you alone.”

“You've left me alone before,” she reminded him. But she didn't like it either, not after he'd reluctantly told her about his heated discussion with Hyland and Caleb Nelson.

“You're not to leave home,” he said. “And I want Hans to accompany you at all times.”

“Wow, my very own bodyguard,” she muttered. She cleared her throat. “They'd be fools to come here.”

“Unfortunately, Hyland Nelson does not strike me as the most balanced of men.” Duncan frowned. “There’s something between him and Tim.”

Erin plunked down on the bed. “He likes hurting him.” This observation was based on the patchwork of faded scars and bruises that covered Tim’s body. Any attempts to get him to talk to them continued to be met by silence.

“I fear it may be more than that.” Duncan straightened up and called for Jasper. His manservant popped his head in, assured Duncan he had everything under control and held out Duncan’s heavy cloak.

“Not that it will help,” Jasper sniffed. “We’ll be like drenched cats before we reach Philadelphia.” He gave Erin a mournful look and patted at his elegantly coiffed hair. “Why I even bothered with this, I do not know.”

“How more than that?” Erin asked as she trailed Duncan down the stairs.

“I don’t know. Maybe Tim knows something about Hyland Nelson he does not want to come out. Or maybe he just enjoys inflicting pain.”

Erin came to an abrupt halt. “Maybe that’s why Tim refuses to talk. Maybe Nelson has threatened him so often about spilling the secret that he prefers to be silent.”

“Maybe.” Duncan shrugged. “I am not interested in Nelson’s secrets.”

“Generally, those who have secrets are convinced everyone is interested in them. Besides, what if Tim saw him kill someone or—”

“Shush. We do not know, Erin.” He stepped outside. “I must be off. Jasper will never forgive me if I keep him astride his horse longer than necessary, not in this weather.” He made as if to leave.

“You forgot something.” She wound her arms round his neck. “Stay safe, Duncan Melville.”

“Always, honey, always.” He kissed her. She clung to him; he deepened the kiss, one strong arm holding her so close she could feel the muscles of his thighs and his growing erection. With a little groan, he released her. “It will be hell to ride like this.”

“Well, at least you can think hot thoughts to keep you warm.”

Erin waved them off and returned inside, shivering.

“Damned weather,” she said, joining Esther where she was sitting sewing beside the fire. She looked about with some pride, taking in the high skirting boards and the cornices. It had taken her weeks to create this little parlour, a space small enough that

the single fireplace kept it nice and warm no matter the weather outside.

“It will soon be over.” Esther bit off the thread. “Spring is just around the corner.” She folded the garment and picked up the next.

“Somehow, it always feels much better once we’re in March,” Erin said, receiving an incredulous look in return. “Yes, yes, I know: March is a month of work, of ploughing and sowing and all that, but at least we can be outside.” Erin took pride in helping out as well as she could during those busy weeks and had, to her delight, discovered she was good at handling the oxen. She also made herself useful in the kitchen garden, having constructed two stout spades to help with the digging.

“Do you think Tim is mute?” Esther asked out of the blue.

Erin pursed her lips. “He did say his name,” she said, “so no. I think he is choosing to be silent. Maybe he’s learned the hard way to always hold his tongue.”

Esther grimaced. “That poor lad! Permanently scarred by all those savage beatings.”

“Yeah, someone should do that to Hyland Nelson,” Erin said. “See how he’d like it, being whipped until he bled.”

From the kitchen came a loud squeal.

“Oh dear,” Erin said, leaping to her feet. “That’s Sandy.”

“How on earth can you hear the difference?” Esther asked.

Erin smiled. "I guess a mother always does."

She found Sandy and Ellen in a heap on the stone-flagged floor, both of them making grabs for the cat. Mrs Andersson gave her a harried look. "How am I to cook and bake when I have them underfoot?" She was standing in front of the huge hearth—big enough for there to be a chair beside the glowing fire. From the pot hanging over the fire came the scents of thyme and chicken, and on the table a covered dish promised pie for dessert.

"Where's Julie? I asked her to look after them," Erin said, scooping up Ellen to give her a loud kiss. The child squirmed, locks spilling from under her cap. They were remarkably like their father with those big blue eyes, thick dark hair and fair skin, several shades lighter than Erin's own honey-brown skin. A good thing, given the times, but it filled her with a complex brew of fear and resentment: what if their next child—because by now she'd accepted there would probably be more kids—took after her? How would such a child be treated?

"Julie? I haven't seen her since breakfast." Mrs Andersson clucked. "That wench! I'd wager you she's in the barn with you Will."

Probably. Will was the eldest son of Giles, one of their tenants, a good catch for someone like Julie, recently arrived from the old country on her own. Just like Tim, Julie was an

indentured servant. In difference to Tim, she'd been sixteen when she'd set her mark on the contract, not a child recently out of clouts.

Mrs Andersson scowled. "She should be here, scrubbing the floor." Mrs Andersson was house-proud to the extreme when it came to the kitchen, and it fell to Julie to do the hard work required to keep it all so clean you could probably eat straight off the floor. "And someone needs to fix that shutter," she added.

Two large windows—one to the west, the other to the south—gave the kitchen a lot of light. One of Erin's better improvements, if she said so herself, smiling with pride. Twelve small panes of glass in each window offered a view of the front yard and kitchen garden respectively.

"I'll do it," she said, which, if anything, only made Mrs Andersson's scowl deeper. "Not right," she muttered. "A woman with a hammer, pah!"

The rain did not let up until next evening. After two entire days cooped up, Erin just had to go outside, so after having settled her babies for the night, she wrapped herself in a shawl and stepped outside. Everything dripped. The air smelled of water and wet earth, and the various buildings were visible only as darker shadows against the cloudy sky. Something flitted by.

For an instant, the weak light from the kitchen window illuminated Tim's head before he was swallowed up by the dark.

She guessed he was making for the stables. This silent addition to their household had an affinity with animals, and particularly horses. She took a couple of deep breaths, filling her lungs with cool, crisp air, and strolled off in the general direction of the outhouses. Somehow, she ended up in front of the shed that housed her working space, regretting that she hadn't brought a lantern. A couple of hours with her new plane, smoothing the planks intended to become the new flooring in one of the upstairs rooms, would have done her good.

She shoved the door open, inhaling the scent of wood and was considering whether to return for light when a high-pitched sound had her freezing to the spot. Yet another sound—a muffled scream.

Instinctively, she grabbed hold of one of her tools. Armed with a mallet, she took a few cautious steps out into the yard. One of the horses neighed. A heavy hoof struck the plank walls, and Erin squinted in the direction of the stables. Footfalls, the sound of a scuffle. A grunt, a hissed curse, and the dull sound of a fist hitting flesh.

She'd reached the stables. Her hand slipped on the smooth wood of the mallet handle, her pulse loud in her head. Erin pressed herself against the coarse wall planks and tried to calm

her breathing. From inside came yet another dull thwack, and another, followed by the unmistakable sound of someone in pain. Low voices, a chuckle, and this time the sound of the blow was followed by a yelp, quickly muffled. It didn't take a genius to work out who was in their stable, and she winced at the sounds of Tim being subjected to what must be a vicious beating. She tightened her hold on the mallet. *Enough*, she told herself, *don't stand here, Erin, do something! Now.*

From the direction of the main house came the wavering light of a lantern.

"Who goes there?" Hans called out.

"Over here!" Erin yelled. "There's someone in the stables!" Safe in the knowledge that Hans was coming, she plunged inside. A huge, beefy hand grabbed hold of her.

"Your man comes here and I'll kill the lad," Hyland Nelson growled. In response, Erin swung the mallet. It struck Nelson and he yelped, releasing her. "Bitch!" he snarled, and like a cobra he struck, his punch sending her to the ground. He gripped her hair and lifted her to her knees. "That's better," he chuckled. "On the ground, ready to serve your master."

"In your dreams!" This time, she put every ounce of strength into the blow. The mallet struck him across the knee with such force she could hear something break. To judge from how he



hollered, it hurt. She tore free, wincing at the resulting pain, and got to her feet.

“Get out!” she told him.

“Not without him,” someone said from behind her, and she could make out yet another shadow, this one hauling a slumped shape she assumed to be Tim.

“Over my dead body,” she said, sidling away from a badly limping Hyland.

Caleb laughed, releasing Tim to fall to the ground. “Oh, that can be arranged,” he said, and the weak light glinted on the muzzle of a pistol. He cocked the hammer, the distinctive sound loud.

Shit! Erin took a couple of steps backwards.

Caleb grinned. “Don’t bother. At this distance, I won’t miss.”

From behind her, Hyland laughed.

“You kill me, you hang,” Erin said.

“Really?” Caleb drawled. “And where is your witness? Besides, who cares if a coloured hussy dies?” He aimed.

Erin tensed, her hold on the mallet tightening.

From the crumpled heap on the floor came a hoarse howl.

Tim leapt upward, striking Caleb’s arm.

The gun went off.

Erin threw herself to the floor.

Tim collapsed.

“Ah!” Hyland Nelson exclaimed, staggering backwards.

“Father?” Caleb said, just as Hans stormed in, lantern aloft.

“Father!” Caleb shrieked.

Hyland Nelson was leaning against one of the large hewn, timber uprights, hands pressed to his middle. “Help me,” he croaked.

Erin backed away.

“Help him!” Caleb yelled, pointing at Erin with his pistol.

“Help him, or I’ll—”

“You shot him. You help him,” Erin said.

“He’s bleeding,” Caleb said, his entire arm shaking. “Dear God, look at all that blood!” A dark stain was spreading fast over Hyland Nelson’s front.

“Gut wound,” Hans put in. “Painful, *ja?*”

Tim got to his feet. He swayed, making a grab for one of the stall doors to steady himself.

Caleb was on his knees by his father. Hans had drawn his own pistol but was making no move to approach the intruders. Erin sidled closer to him.

“Will he die?” she whispered.

Hans nodded.

“Good,” Erin said.

“Good?” Caleb flew to his feet and pointed his gun at her.

“You killed him! You and your meddling!”

“Me? You’re the one who blew a hole through his stomach.”

“Because of you! If he dies, I swear—”

“He will die,” Hans interrupted. “Either here or at the end of a noose for threatening my mistress, as will you. Brigands, thieves, the both of you.”

“We came to reclaim what is ours!” Caleb shrieked. “Ours! She stole him—”

“*Ja?* And you have a contract proving you own him?” Hans asked.

Erin’s eyes widened. She’d never heard the big German so voluble—or so fluent—in English.

From Hyland Nelson came a loud groan. Caleb crouched beside him, adding his free hand to his father’s. The wavering light of the lantern illuminated the spreading blood on the floor.

Tim tugged at Erin’s sleeve. “Die?” he croaked. She frowned at the dark bruises ringing his neck, at the tears and stains on his shirt.

“It seems so,” she said, tentatively touching her throbbing face.

Tim’s face broke out into a smile, revealing bloodied teeth. He shuffled forward and spat Hyland Nelson full in the face. Then he limped off.

Caleb was back on his feet, his gaze darting from his father to the open door. Ultimately, the desire to escape won out, and

he leapt towards the entrance. "I will make you pay!" he spat over his shoulder before ducking into the night.

From the dying man came a wheezing chuckle. "My boy," he panted. "You heard him. He'll make you pay."

"How?" Erin said coldly. "He'll hang for this."

Hyland Nelson grinned. "His word against yours. Against the word of a former slave and an indentured foreigner." He laughed, coughed and emitted one long groan. His head fell forward.

"He's right," Hans said quietly.

"Find Giles," Erin told him. He lived closer than Sivard.

"Now!"