

Melbourne, Australia, 6 December 1879

The bowl had long been stained by the dye, but Chrystelle scrubbed it regardless before patting it dry and placing it on top of the overflowing pile that spilled from the large wooden trunk in her cabin. Silks and satins, cottons and wools vied for space in a tumble of brilliant colour, awaiting Chrystelle Amour's choice each day. Holding up a green, yellow-trimmed dress, she decided to make it today's costume, her 'welcome to Australia' outfit. It seemed fitting, based on the countryside she'd seen so far.

The great southern land boasted a shoreline bathed in myriad hues. Sheer golden sandstone cliffs and pristine jewelled coves shone from her shores along the Bight, the thick green bushland that ran above it now interspersed with civilisation as Melbourne came into view. She'd heard much about the city from the other passengers during the journey, and the busy port bustled with activity as the ship moored at last, almost seeming to sigh as it came to rest after its long, arduous voyage.

Chrystelle donned the dress and tied her bootlaces, relieved to be disembarking and looking forward to feeling solid ground once more. It had been a safe trip, and relatively incident-free if you discounted one very drunken evening enjoyed by the other passengers and crew during a stopover in Perth, but a sailor she was not. The country girl within her craved the earth.

Outfit selected, she took out her hand mirror to put on her daily mask of colour, tracing lipstick and powdering her nose to hide the traces of that girl she used to be, the one whose skin soaked in the sun too easily as she daydreamed in her tree. Then she arranged her gloriously red hair into a chignon and placed a bright green hat atop, fixing each strand until she was satisfied that she was perfectly groomed from head to toe. And brown-free, save her eyes. The only part of her appearance that betrayed her. The colour inside.

Casting one last look at her reflection she packed the mirror away and stood to take a deep breath, pausing for a moment to place her hands across her swollen belly, and stared out to the sprawling town that would be her new home. The place she would raise her child, alone. She spared a thought for John Worthington then, the first man she had been set up with after Ruby Starks had found her at Kings Cross station back in London and taken her on. She'd made it sound a perfunctory undertaking, turning whore, telling the penniless girl in her only blue dress that she would be the one in control of her life from this day forward.

'Every woman is a prostitute, in one way or another,' Ruby had said as she'd pulled daringly low dresses from her wardrobe and held them up against her. 'Men are fuelled by lust and they need to satisfy it. At least we professionals are honest about that and face it head on,' she'd added, taking out her make-up case and clicking it open with routine aplomb. 'We're in control.'

Control. How she'd latched onto that word, allowing it to numb all the pain

and desperation that had led her to whoredom, and the fear of what that would entail. She'd let it influence every decision from that moment on.

'What's your name?' Ruby had asked then, holding up a crystal necklace and matching it to a red silk gown.

'Chrystelle,' she'd said on impulse, staring at the necklace. Her first grasp at that control. Ruby had merely raised her eyebrows, suggesting Amour be tagged on.

'You're in the business of love now, after all.'

Chrystelle Amour. A woman in control even of love. Never to be so weak as to feel it again. Strong enough to impersonate it each day.

'Control,' she whispered now as she stared out at Melbourne and clenched her purse strings tight. Ruby had given her good advice that day, and John had been the perfect choice for Chrystelle's first client; kind and attentive, and not ungentle as she lay beneath him and he used her body for his lust. He'd wanted her exclusively, which suited Chrystelle fine. One lover was an easier reality to accept, and by the time she'd realised she was pregnant, and that new-found control threatened to crumble, he'd helped her keep it together. He'd talked of love and support, but not marriage, of course. A whore is never a wife. And you could never be sure whose child she carried.

But Chrystelle knew. She knew it as surely as she'd known John was gone when he died in her arms a few weeks later, and as clearly as the fact that one day his son would hunt her down to try to use her past to take back the precious fortune John had left her. Even here, on the other side of the world.

She knew it with the same certainty that the horizon would always be there, just beyond reach, and that the Beltane fires would scour the sky in Irish villages come spring.

But above all she knew it with the same stone-cold conviction – she'd stand on her own two feet in this new land, never letting anyone take her control again. For never again would she ever be Anne Brown.