

FORTUNE'S SON

By Jennifer Scoullar

CHAPTER 1

Funny, but on the day it happened Luke had never felt so cocky. As he set off in the cart that grey afternoon through Hobart's wintry streets, he felt like he owned them. Felt like a king. Youth will do that to you.

Storm clouds piled high in the leaden sky as he drew rein in the lane behind Abbott House. The imposing double-storey home, with its fashionable Battery Point address, was a far cry from Luke's humble cottage in working-class Wapping. Yet he wouldn't have swapped them. For all its grandeur, there was something cold, even sinister about the home's forbidding stone façade.

The force of the gathering gale caused the old pony to whinny and shy like a colt. Luke glanced up at Mt Wellington, its peak shrouded in cloud. Better hurry, the rain would hit soon. He knocked at the kitchen door, cap in hand, head bowed to the bitter southern blast. After a long wait, the housekeeper answered his knock. He was a favourite of hers, and knew it. A handsome lad with even features and bold, brown eyes, women already found his larrikin style and quick wit appealing. But instead of allowing him into the kitchen and out of the weather, perhaps even offering him a treat of freshly baked bread, she seemed oddly flustered and tried to close the door in his face. Luke jammed his boot inside to block it.

'I've come for my sister, Mrs Dunsley. Where is she?'

The housekeeper avoided Luke's eye and tried again to force the door shut. With a shove he entered the cosy kitchen, which smelled comfortingly of cinnamon scones and roast beef. Generally he'd find Becky there, chopping vegetables or polishing the silver tableware required for the evening meal when Sir Henry Abbott was in town. This time she was nowhere to be seen.

'Your sister will be here directly,' said Mrs Dunsley. 'She'll be taking the master his tea, is all. How about a nice piece of corn bread and jam? Or would you rather some cold lamb and chutney? I think I can find a glass of warm buttermilk to go with that.'

Bread and buttermilk? Why wasn't she cuffing him round the ears for his cheek? And since when was it the job of a lowly kitchen maid to take the master his tea?

Ignoring her protests, he pushed past into the hall. Faint sobs came from the parlour to his left. Bursting through the door he found Rebecca on the floor – blouse undone, skirts pushed up around her waist, lip split and bleeding. On top of her lay a trouser-less Henry Abbott, so intent on his pleasure that for a few seconds he failed to notice Luke enter the room.

He was only fourteen years old, but Luke could more than hold his own in a street fight. Working at his uncle's blacksmith shop had given him powerful arms and a strong, straight back. Even so, he may well have been no match for the much older and heavier Sir Henry if it had not been for the power of his outrage. And the sight of his sister's rumpled clothes, skinny legs, and bloody, tear-drenched face caused any respect he might have had for his superiors to vanish.

Luke dragged the surprised man off Rebecca by the collar of his fine starched linen shirt, choking him in the process. Then hurled him half-naked and headfirst against the wall. Henry Abbott tried to stand,

revealing a broken nose and two chipped front teeth. Dimly, Luke was aware he should stop, but he didn't. He drove his fist hard into Abbott's temple, rendering the master of the house unconscious.

'Luke, you shouldn't have . . .'

Turning his attention to Becky, he gently helped her to her feet, murmuring words of comfort, adjusting the crying girl's clothes. Then, cradled like a child in arms, he carried his sister past the astonished Mrs Dunsley out to the cart, gee'd up the impatient pony and drove home before the storm struck.

His mother, Alice, was in the kitchen when Luke guided Becky through the front door, down the hall and into her little bedroom. 'Is that you, Luke?'

'Don't tell Mama,' whispered Becky. 'I'll die if you tell Mama.'

Her sobs were loud enough to summon Alice from the kitchen. 'Whatever's wrong?' she asked. 'Luke? Becky?'

Luke took his mother's hand. 'No . . .'

said Becky, but Luke was already leading Alice from the room, shutting the door behind him.

As Luke recounted the events of that awful afternoon, all colour drained from his mother's face. 'You have to get away, this very minute,' she said, her voice low and urgent. 'Pack a change of clothes while I get some food. Hurry.'

'Go?' said Luke. 'Why should I go? I'm going to make Abbott pay.'

'It'll be you who'll pay, my darling,' said Alice. 'Who knows what they'll charge you with.'

'Let them put me in the witness box.' Luke crossed his arms over his chest. 'I can't wait to tell the world what sort of scum Abbott is.'

'I'll pack your bag myself then.' Alice turned on her heel, running down the hall towards the lean-to on the back porch where Luke slept.

She tossed a few things in his canvas pack with shaking hands. Becky appeared in the doorway, her face pale, and swollen around the jaw and temple. She'd have a black eye by morning. Alice turned and hugged her daughter fiercely enough that it hurt them both. She had to pull herself together. She mustn't let fears for Luke overshadow what had happened to their sweet Rebecca. Alice touched the girl's face with infinite tenderness, and choked back a sob. Where would Becky end up now? At the jam factory or flour mill? Work for girls in those places was like slow murder. And what if she fell pregnant?

'Luke will be all right, won't he?' said Becky. 'Papa will know what to do.'

'Yes, yes . . . shush now,' Alice said soothingly, but she knew better. Thomas couldn't fix this. Luke had to leave, and leave now. It was his only hope. The coppers wouldn't be far off and there'd be no fair trial of the kind Luke imagined. Even if Rebecca could face the shame of testifying, the word of a servant girl was of dubious value against the statement of a wealthy and important man like Henry Abbott.

Alice's mind worked furiously as she grabbed boiled potatoes and cheese from the kitchen. The only person alive who might help them was Daniel Campbell. He'd gone out of his way to aid their family before. Giving Thomas work. Taking Luke into his school. A kind man. A respected man, with standing

in society. But he was somewhere up country, many days' ride distant. Thomas must go for him anyway.

Thomas. She drew a long, shuddering sigh. Any minute her husband would burst in the door with that cheerful smile, declaring his family was worth ten of other men's. How would she tell him?

Alice dashed back to Luke, thrust the pack into his hands, and pulled him down the hall towards the back door. 'Go bush, up the mountain, to that little camp of yours. They'll never find you there.'

'I won't run, Mama. It's not me that's done wrong.'

He'd grown so tall, her son, and he stood there, an immovable object.

They looked at each other, eye to eye, as the pounding at the front door began.

'Please, Luke,' Alice said.

But then the door flew open and two constables trooped in.

'Luke Tyler,' said the biggest man in a rough voice. 'I'm arresting you for the grievous assault of Sir Henry Abbott.'

Becky appeared at the doorway, shivering and hollow-eyed. The look on her face. She shook her head as if doubting the truth of what was happening.

Luke stood his ground, confident that justice would prevail. Even when they shoved him against the wall. Even when they seized his arms. Only when they chained his hands behind his back did Luke react. He exploded with impotent rage, roaring like an animal. The chains held tight. What could he do?

'No.' Alice grabbed hold of Luke. 'You can't take him. You can't take my son. He was protecting his sister, that's all.' She tried to prise the constables' fingers from his arm and was slapped away.

'Don't cry, Mama,' Luke called as they dragged him out. 'I'll be back soon, I promise.'

Alice ran into the street after them, into the rain and gloom. Icy fingers gripped her heart so tightly it could barely beat. A fog wrapped around her mind, stealing her senses, making her stumble. She fell on the slippery road, landing hard in the mud. When she looked up, Luke was already gone.