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## *Late February 1866*

Xanthe Blake stared out of the kitchen window at the parched Australian landscape. The grass outside the paddocks was beige because it was summer and hadn't rained for two months. Leathery dried leaves lay in drifts here and there, rotting more slowly than English leaves did. Since water was precious, she picked up the tin washing-up bowl and carried it outside, tipping it carefully along the nearest row of vegetables. A sudden longing for the green fields and soft air of Lancashire swept over her. She'd grown up there, had been forced to come to Australia and work as a maid nearly three years ago—and didn't intend to stay here for much longer.

'Penny for them.'

She realised she'd been standing there lost in thought and turned to see her employer standing in the doorway, giving her one of his serious, assessing looks. She had a great deal of respect for Conn Largan, who might have come here as a convict, but he'd been convicted on political charges, which didn't make him a criminal in her eyes. Anyway, his mother had assured them he'd been innocent and Mrs Largan wasn't a liar.

'My thoughts aren't worth a penny.' She tried for a light tone, but could see from the way he tilted his head to one side and studied her that he wouldn't be deflected. As an ex-lawyer

he was a very shrewd man, but he was kind, too, and she was tempted to confide in him.

'You're an intelligent woman and your thoughts are usually well worth listening to, Xanthe,' he urged gently.

So she told him, because she was aching to talk to someone about her problem and this was one time when she couldn't confide in her twin. 'I'm trying to work out two things: first, where I should go from here and second, how to persuade Maia to let me go on my own and leave her here at Galway House where she's happy.'

He was silent for so long she nearly went back into the kitchen.

'It'd be better for Maia if you took her with you,' he said at last.

'How can you even think that? I want to travel, but she's a homebody—and besides, she's absolutely devoted to your mother.' Maia was devoted to her master too, though Xanthe was never quite sure whether Conn knew that her sister loved him. She was fairly sure his mother was aware of it, but open as she was about most things, Mrs Largan had never even hinted at it.

He began pacing up and down, avoiding looking directly at her. 'I can find other maids to do the housework and care for my mother, if you'll give me a little time.'

She was puzzled by that. Did he really want to get rid of them both? 'That's not easy in the Swan River Colony. There are ten men to every woman here and people with money are desperate for maids. You might not realise it, but Maia and I have had lots of other offers since we started working for you. Men come to see you about horses but they also come to me and Maia secretly, begging us to go and work for their wives.' One or two had wanted more from her, but she wasn't going to sell her body, however much they offered. No less than three of the younger men who lived nearby had proposed marriage to her, on the briefest acquaintance. She'd had no hesitation in refusing.

She wished sometimes she was ugly, then men wouldn't pester her in that way. Unlike the other young women she'd known, she'd never met one with whom she wanted to spend

her whole life, so had decided there was something wrong with her. But since she and her sisters had inherited money from their uncle, she didn't need to marry to find a man to support her, wouldn't even need to work for a living as long as she didn't live extravagantly. She was lucky, or she would be once some of her inheritance was sent to her in Australia. Until then, she was as short of money as she'd always been.

'I could send back to Ireland for a maid or two,' Conn said. 'Though I realise that would take nearly a year and you may not be willing to wait so long.'

'I can't go anywhere till our money comes through. When Pandora wrote to let us know she'd got back safely to England, she said it might take some time to sell the cottages my uncle left us, then find someone to bring the money to us here. She and Zachary want to buy the shop from us, so there'll be more money to come later from that, as well.'

He frowned again. 'It's not going to be easy to get money out here safely. And even when you get it, where would you keep it? The Post Office Savings Bank or the Perth Building Society? Neither has been open long enough to prove themselves safe. Other banks here haven't lasted long, either. I wonder now . . .' He turned away, staring into the distance, then said thoughtfully, 'A close friend of mine is thinking of coming out for a visit, possibly to settle here. I'd trust Ronan with my life. He could perhaps bring you some of the money at the same time. There's nothing like good golden sovereigns safe in your purse or strongbox.'

He paused to let her think about it, strolling to the fence to stare across the grassy paddock, the grass of which was kept more or less green by regular watering from the well.

Conn Largan was like that, Xanthe thought, watching him. He never tried to force a quick reply or impose his opinions on others. Had he always been so reasonable or had being transported done that to him? she wondered. Most men brought up with a privileged background like his were not nearly as courteous towards their servants—especially a servant who was thinking of giving notice.

'That might be a good idea,' she said at last. 'I shan't want all my money bringing here anyway because I'm definitely going back to England at some stage, and will probably stay there, so—'

There was a gasp behind her and she swung round to see her twin staring at her in dismay from the kitchen doorway. Seeing her sister was always like looking at a slightly altered image of herself in the mirror. Physically, they were almost identical, tall and with the same dark hair and eyes, but Maia was slightly plumper and softer looking. In character they weren't at all alike. Xanthe knew she was far more decisive, while Maia was too gentle for her own good.

Her twin rushed across to grab her arm. 'You can't mean that, Xanthe. I know you said last year that you weren't staying here for ever, but I thought you'd settled down. You've seemed happy enough.'

'I made up my mind to enjoy the experience of living in Australia until I could see my way clear to moving somewhere else. I haven't changed my mind at all. I just—didn't see the point of upsetting you.'

'When must we leave? Can we at least stay until I find a replacement to look after Mrs Largan? Oh, I shall miss her so much!'

Xanthe looked at her sadly. 'You don't want to leave at all, love. You know you don't.'

'I'll not be separated from you.'

'You hate travelling and I want to do quite a bit of that, though at least you're not seasick like poor Pandora was.' When her sister would have spoken, she held up one hand. 'No, let me finish, Maia. You prefer staying at home, being with people you know, while I like to meet new people. That was the best part of the voyage out here, talking to people, going to the classes on the ship, learning new things.'

She looked over her shoulder and saw to her relief that Conn had moved further away, leaving them to talk privately. Still, she lowered her voice. 'Besides, how can you leave? You

love him, don't you?'

Maia's eyes filled with tears. 'You know I do. But it's hopeless. He's an educated gentleman and I'm just a mill girl, even if I do have a little money behind me now. He'd never look at someone like me in that way.'

'You're not *just* anything. Our father didn't only give the four of us fancy Greek names, he made sure we grew up with a love of books so that we could keep our minds fed as well as our bodies. You're the equal of anyone else in understanding.'

'As if other people care about that! What they think important is *knowing your place in society* and behaving accordingly.'

'When have we ever done what was expected of us? We're our father's daughters in more ways than one. If not, we'd be long married with a gaggle of children tugging at our skirts. Well, I shan't ever—' She saw her sister's expression change. 'Oh, I'm a fool to talk like that! There's nothing you'd have liked better than a gaggle of children, is there?'

Maia tried to smile. 'It wasn't to be. I'm twenty-seven and I've never met the right man, even though quite a few tried to court me when we lived in Lancashire. I'd not settle for anything less than a husband I could love. Look how happy Cassandra and Reece are. I want that sort of marriage or none. He's a fine brother-in-law, isn't he?'

'Yes, she's fortunate to have found him.' Xanthe gave her a hug and there they left it.

But she hadn't changed her mind. Once she got her money, she was leaving Australia—and on her own. Life here was too limited for her taste and sometimes she felt like screaming at the boring repetition of her daily routines. She didn't enjoy being the housekeeper, though she did her work as well as she could, out of sheer pride.

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In Lancashire a few months later, Pandora Carr woke up feeling sick. She lay still and closed her eyes, willing it to go away, but it didn't.

'Are you all right?' Zachary asked.

'No. I'm feeling sick again.' She heard him suck in his breath and knew what he was hoping. 'I must be expecting a child,' she admitted.

'Oh, my darling girl! I'm so happy.'

She risked a slight movement to look at him. His plain bony face was lit up with joy. He'd never be handsome but he was attractive to her and to others too because of the kindness of his nature. 'I'm not sure how I feel about it,' she admitted. 'It's too soon.'

He laughed softly. 'Children come when chance wills it. And anyway, didn't we say we wanted three or four?'

'Not yet, though. I've hardly settled into the routine of the shop. We've not even been back in England for a year. You and I have so many plans now that the war in America is over and the town's mills are coming to life again.' She and Zachary intended to buy her sisters' share of her uncle's shop where he'd worked since he was twelve and which he loved.

'I know, love, but we'll manage just fine with a baby. I'll make sure my children never want.' He watched her anxiously. 'Can I help in any way? There must be something wrong if you're not bouncing out of bed.'

She smiled wanly. 'I've a sudden longing for a cup of tea, very sweet. Could you ask Dot to bring one up, please?'

He leaned forward to press a kiss on her forehead. 'I'll do it straight away.' He'd heard their maid get up a little while ago.

Half an hour later Pandora got up and although she felt a little dizzy at first, her body soon settled down again. She was even more grateful than usual for the wonderful indoor bathroom and smiled wryly as she remembered her days working as a maid in Australia, sleeping in a tent, fetching all the water from the well, using a trench for a privy at first. It had been hard, especially after her eldest sister Cassandra got married and left her on her own with their employers.

The thought of her three sisters brought tears to her eyes, as it often did. She'd been so desperately homesick in Australia, she'd been wasting away with unhappiness, but the others had loved it there and refused to come back to England with her.

She knew they'd always keep in touch by letter but that wasn't very satisfying and it still hurt to be so far away from them. Things would never be the same as when they'd lived together. Why, it took over six months to send a letter and get a reply. She'd been expecting to hear from at least one of her sisters for the past few weeks.

Sighing she finished getting dressed and went down to the kitchen to discuss the day's work with Dot—she still wasn't used to having a maid—then into the shop to see Zachary before it opened.

'Feeling better now?' he asked with a smile.

'Much better. What are you going to do today? How is the new tea blend you created?' She felt shut out of the shop, because only men served there and they didn't like her even making suggestions openly, so she had to do that through Zachary, for his sake.

'Blake's Best Tea is selling well. Your uncle always said I had a good sense of taste and smell, and I think I've achieved as good a blend as he did. Today I'm going to look at the shelving in the shop. I'm sure we can arrange things more efficiently. I want your help there. We can study it together then draw up plans. So have a think about it.'

She loved the way he tried to include her. 'Breakfast is ready now. You'd better hurry up or the shopmen will be here.'

Just as Blake's Emporium was opening, the postman arrived at the house door with a letter from Australia. Pandora beamed at the mere sight of it. How marvellous that a small thing like a letter could come so far in safety! She blinked away tears as she traced out Xanthe's handwriting on the envelope with her fingertips.

Closing the house door, she went to stand at the inner entrance to the shop, waving the envelope triumphantly at her husband. He grinned and waved back, knowing this letter

would make her day.

Then she could wait no longer and hurried upstairs to the parlour to read it. A quick glance showed her that it was mostly in Xanthe's handwriting this time. There would be inserts from both Maia and Cassandra, though, there always were.

Only there weren't any inserts this time. It was a long letter in which Xanthe poured out her heart. And what she read both upset and delighted Pandora. It might mean she'd see her sister again.

And whatever Xanthe said, she didn't think Maia would let her twin go so far away.