***Prologue***

***Western Australia: March 1870***

Bram finished his evening meal and looked round with a sigh. ‘I do miss having the other children around.’

His wife smiled. ‘They were only living with us for a short time. And though they’ve moved out, they and their new family live a mere two streets away, so you’re still be seeing them most days. You’re never satisfied, Bram Deagan.’

He shrugged. ‘You know it’s my dream to have my family join us in Australia, Isabella darlin’. Why else do we have this fine big home but to fill it with people we love?’

He leaned across to give her a quick kiss on the cheek, then looked thoughtful. ‘And I like to have friends round me, as well as family. I do wish Mitchell and Dougal would find themselves wives.’

‘You know Dougal met someone on his last voyage. His voice still goes softer when he speaks of this Eleanor.’

‘She’s no use to him, though. She’s married already, and she’s gone off to live in England.’ He began to drum his fingers on the table. ‘We should start looking round for someone who’d suit him. Sometimes people need a bit of a nudge.’

‘Leave him to find his own wife, Bram.’

‘He’s nearly forty and he hasn’t got one. And there’s Mitchell to think of, too. He needs another wife to help him bring up his son and give him other children.’

‘Well, there’s a shortage of suitable ladies here in the Swan River Colony, so how’s he going to do that?’

‘They’re calling it Western Australia now. It’s not as pretty a name, is it? Now, about Mitchell—’

‘Bram, don’t!’

He ignored her, still counting off his unmarried friends on his fingers. ‘And what about Livia? If ever a woman needed a husband, it’s her. That makes three of them.’

Isabella grabbed his arm and gave him a shake to get his attention. ‘Darling, you can’t interfere. Both Mitchell and Livia have been married once and are over thirty, while Dougal’s nearly forty. If any of them want to marry, they’re quite capable of finding someone without your help. Besides, you have enough on your plate with our trading business.’

‘I can keep my eyes open, can’t I?’

‘You’re a hopeless romantic.’

He gave her a quick hug, laughing as he had to lean over the stomach full of his baby. ‘That’s because I have the best wife in the world, and will soon have three children. I do hope the new one will be a girl. Ah, you’ve made me very happy, Isabella darlin’.’

‘And you me. You’ve such a gift for loving people.’

They sat for a moment or two longer, clasping hands and smiling tenderly at one another.

But Bram’s frown returned when his wife went up to check on their young son and the little girl they’d adopted. He’d managed to distract her and avoid talking about money, though he’d meant what he said about their unmarried friends, but he had a few business worries.

Isabella knew about most of them, because she kept the accounts for his bazaar. But he hadn’t told her yet that his investment in some new ice-making machinery needed more money putting into it if it wasn’t to fail, because she’d been against getting involved in that from the start.

He hated to leave the venture unfinished, was sure there would be a profit in it one day. Besides, the ice had saved his son’s life when the child had a fever, and never mind the money, he wanted the ice available for other children in need. He sighed. His partner would have to wait a while longer for the money, though. He just didn’t have any to spare at the moment.

Ah, something would turn up. It always did.

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The very next day Bram ran into Mitchell in town and seized the moment. ‘Just the man I want to see.’

‘Do you need some more timber? Surely you’re not going to extend the Bazaar again.’

‘No. You and your carpenter have finished my new house beautifully. It’s you I’m worried about, Mitchell. You’ve been talking for a while about finding another wife, but you haven’t done anything about it.’

‘Actually, I have.’

Bram looked at him in surprise. ‘Oh? You’ve met someone?’

‘No. After we talked last time, I did as you suggested and wrote to my family in England, asking if they knew any lady who might be willing to come out to Australia to marry me.’

Bram clapped him on the shoulder. ‘Good man! Good man! Did you send them a photograph of yourself as well?’

‘Yes. Of me *and* my son. I wanted there to be no mistake about what someone would be taking on.’

‘You’re a fine looking man and he’s a sturdy lad. I’m sure your family will find someone suitable.’

‘What does “suitable” mean? I don’t care about the woman’s looks. I told them that. She can be as ugly as you please. What I care about is finding someone who’s kind and practical, someone who’ll help me make a home for my son and give me other children. I doubt I’ll ever fall in love again. I chose so unwisely last time that I no longer trust myself. The trouble is . . . ’ He sighed.

‘What?’

‘After I’d sent the letter to my cousin, I had second thoughts. How can anyone else choose a wife for me, Bram? How can I be sure she’ll be kind and pleasant tempered without meeting her? Only it was too late by then to get the letter back.’

Bram hoped he hadn’t allowed his satisfaction to show. ‘Well, you’ll have to leave it to fate now, won’t you?’

‘Yes, but what if my cousin sends someone who’s unsuitable?’

‘You’ll give her a chance, surely? Not judge her on a first meeting, when she’ll be nervous. She can stay with us at first, just to keep things respectable.’

‘I can do nothing else but give a woman a chance if she comes all the way to Australia to meet me. *If* anyone comes, that is.’

As Bram walked away, he decided he wasn’t going to tell Isabella about Mitchell’s doubts. He’d just give her the good news that his friend had asked his family to find him a wife.

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***England, March 1870: Eleanor***

The journey from Australia to England had taken nearly double the usual two months, because of Malcolm’s mistakes. By the time the ship docked at Southampton on a cold day in March, Eleanor Prescott had no doubt that her husband was in far poorer health than he’d admit. He looked shocking, like a walking skeleton, his skin yellowish white, his eyes sunken.

‘Stop fussing, Eleanor,’ he snapped when she suggested seeing a doctor. ‘I’ll be all right once we’re on dry land again. Just like last time.’

‘But you’ve hardly left the cabin during this voyage.’

‘Because I’ve been conserving my strength to help my brother. I pray Roger will still be alive when we get there. As he wrote in his letter, he needs us to act as guardians to his children now that he’s mortally ill of a growth. So sad that his wife died in childbirth, the baby too. Those other two children will be left orphans.’

She watched him sit down and rest. It was true that after the interminable voyage to Australia, Malcolm had slowly improved in health once they disembarked. But he’d still been frail the whole time they were in Melbourne. And he’d been much worse on the journey back to England.

What did he see when he looked in the mirror? Did he really believe that he’d get better? Who knew? She’d never understood how his mind worked, had made such a bad mistake marrying him.

She could only hope Malcolm would live long enough to sort things out with his brother. He wouldn’t make old bones, that was sure. She’d be happy to take on the task of rearing their niece and nephew . . . afterwards.

Her more immediate worry was that she and Malcolm had so little money left now. She didn’t know what they’d do if Roger didn’t make suitable arrangements to help them before he died. Emigrating to Australia had been even more of a disaster than the other business ventures in which her husband had got involved.

She could have done better with their money, she knew she could, but Malcolm didn’t believe in women having anything to do with business. He’d refused even to discuss his financial plans with her, let alone listen to her advice.

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Eleanor and Malcolm arrived at Courtlands late in the afternoon. It was a pleasant country house in Hampshire, about a hundred years old and showing its age in its sagging roof and paintwork which needed attention.

As they got out of the cab they’d taken from the station, he smiled up at the house. ‘You know, I still think of Courtlands as home. We had such a happy childhood here, Roger and I. We were like twins, since he’s only a year older than me.’ He moved forward, tossing over his shoulder, ‘Make sure all the luggage is brought in, Eleanor.’

But the cab driver was already attending to that, so she joined her husband at the top of the three shallow steps.

He tugged the bell pull beside the door and somewhere in the house a bell clanged, the sound faint and muffled. Just as he was about to pull it again, they heard footsteps and the door was opened by an elderly maid, who must be new here.

‘I’m Malcolm Prescott. I’ve come from Australia to see my brother.’

‘I’ll deal with this, Bertha.’ A lady in her middle years appeared behind the maid, who nodded and went to stand waiting at the rear of the hall.

The newcomer was clad in black silk and didn’t so much as smile at them. ‘Roger said he’d written to you asking you to come back, but I was hoped you hadn’t been able to do that.’

Malcolm gaped at her. ‘I beg your pardon? I don’t understand what you mean. And who are you to say such things?’

‘I suppose you’d better come in so that I can explain. Leave the luggage. Bertha will see that it’s brought in. I suppose you’ll have to stay for a night or two.’

She didn’t wait for an answer, but led the way to what had once been Malcolm’s mother’s sitting room.

‘Please sit down.’

‘I’d rather speak to my brother. We’ve come a long way to see him.’

‘I’m afraid Roger died two months ago.’

Malcolm didn’t even make it to a chair. He turned such a sickly white, Eleanor moved to stand nearby, in case. He’d had a couple of fainting fits in the last two weeks and he looked as if he was about to have another one. Sure enough, his eyes rolled up and he would have fallen had she not been ready to catch him and ease him down on a nearby armchair.

‘He looks ill,’ her hostess said bluntly. ‘Very ill.’

Eleanor couldn’t deny that. ‘Sea travel doesn’t agree with my husband. He’ll be better now we’re on land.’

The woman’s expression as she studied Malcolm said she wasn’t fooled by this. ‘Where are you going to be living once we’ve settled matters here?’

‘We were promised a home *here* on condition we looked after Roger’s children. We have nowhere else to go now.’ Malcolm had insisted on selling everything before they left England, so that he had money to invest when they reached Australia. He’d been so sure he’d make a fortune.

‘Well, I’m afraid there’s no permanent place for you here. I’m Roger’s widow, Daphne, by the way. He married me so that *I* would be able to look after his children once he died. I used to be their governess. I’m very happy to raise them, but I didn’t promise to look after you two and what’s more, I won’t do it.’

Eleanor looked meaningfully at her husband and moved across to the bay window. Daphne took the hint and followed.

There was nothing for it but to speak frankly. Eleanor kept her voice low, ‘We don’t have any money left, except for a few pounds. We spent the last of what we had on the journey back to England.’ She flushed and under the steely gaze of the widow, felt compelled to explain, ‘Malcolm wasn’t good with money and he took us to Australia on a wild goose chase, thinking to get rich quickly.’

But since *she* was better with money, she still had a little hidden in her luggage that Malcolm didn’t know about. If she’d told him about it, he’d have taken it from her spent it, and then where would she be?

She’d expected Daphne to get angry, but her hostess merely sighed and replied in an equally low voice, ‘A family trait, then. Roger didn’t handle his money well, either, so I’ve not been left well provided for. But with economy and sensible management, I mean to put the children’s inheritance in order so that they can have a decent start in life. *And* teach them, to handle money properly.’

‘Very . . . um, admirable.’

‘I’m *not* going to make myself responsible for you two as well, however.’

As Malcolm began to come to his senses, Eleanor could only repeat, ‘But we don’t have enough money to go anywhere else. I’m not asking for much, we can live frugally, but we do need your help. There’s nowhere else to turn.’

The only answer was an angry huff of air, so she went back to her husband’s side.

He was looking from one to the other in bewilderment and she quickly explained to him that he’d fainted on hearing of his brother’s death.

‘Roger!’ He hid his face beneath one hand, fighting tears, his shoulders shaking.

Daphne watched him with a scowl. ‘You can stay here for a little while, as long as you don’t demand much attention from the servants. You’ll have to see if you can nurse your husband back to health, then if—when he recovers, he can find himself a job.’

Malcolm didn’t seem to be taking this in, so Daphne addressed Eleanor, ‘He should be able to manage something clerical, surely, enough for you to live on modestly?’

‘But—’

‘You are *not* going to move in here permanently . . . whatever happens.’ She got up and rang the bell. The grey-haired maid appeared.

‘Ah, Bertha. Mr Prescott’s brother and his wife will be staying for a few days. Put them on the second floor. They can have their meals in the schoolroom, unless I invite them to join me.’

Malcolm was now sitting with his head in his hands, weeping openly, muttering his brother’s name again and again.

Daphne turned back to Eleanor. ‘You may think me hard, but it’s a cruel world and I have two children to think of. You look like you’ve got more backbone than your husband, I’ll say that for you. Now, take him upstairs and don’t come down again today. There are books in the schoolroom, if you need something to occupy yourself with, and meals will be brought up to you. Can you sew?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Good. I’ll find you some mending tomorrow and you can make yourself useful while you’re here. Heaven knows, there’s plenty of it needing doing. The house has been very poorly managed. I had to sack the housekeeper.’ She went to hold the door open.

Eleanor helped Malcolm up the stairs and he at once lay down on his bed, closing his eyes, leaving everything to her—as usual.

She turned to the dour maid. ‘I’m sorry to be a trouble, but is there another bedroom I can use? My husband is ill, you see, and doesn’t sleep well.’

The maid studied him, then nodded. ‘He’s very like his brother, isn’t he?’

‘Yes. Very.’ She couldn’t keep the bitterness out of her voice. It was Roger who had encouraged Malcolm to invest in the ridiculous enterprise in Australia and travel out to reap the benefits.

‘I’ll have to ask madam if that’s all right.’

Which showed, Eleanor thought, how much in control of her own life Daphne was. She envied her sister-in-law that.

Bertha came back a few minutes later. ‘The mistress says you can have the bedroom next to this one. But you’ll have to make up the bed and keep the room tidy yourself.’

 ‘I’m happy to do that.’

Malcolm refused a proper meal, contenting himself with sops of bread in warm milk.

Bertha nodded silent approval when Eleanor carried their trays back to the kitchen herself, one by one, refusing help and using the servants’ stairs.

Not until it was dark and she was safely in her own bed did Eleanor allow herself to weep.

Her tears flowed even faster as she remembered Dougal McBride. The ship’s captain had been a true friend to her and she still missed him. Now there was a man worthy of love. *He* wouldn’t have taken to his bed and left her to do the impossible. *He* wouldn’t have left her so poorly situated she had to beg for shelter from a stranger.

Well, it was no use thinking of what might have been. Dougal would have sailed back to Australia in *The Bonny Mary* by now and Eleanor was still tied to a dreary life with Malcolm.

Surely Daphne would agree to help them in *some* way or other? Perhaps there was a cottage in the village? Perhaps Eleanor could act as sewing woman here. There was always plenty of mending to do in a big house, especially with children around.

Tears flowed again. To be always a dependant! To have to be grateful for help that was begrudged!

*Damn you, Malcolm Prescott!*