

# ***Prologue***

## ***Swan River Colony (Western Australia)***

### ***December 1863***

Pandora Blake heard footsteps and tried to brush away the tears as she saw her eldest sister coming across the garden of the Migrants' Home towards her.

'Breakfast is ready.' Cassandra put an arm round her shoulders. 'Oh, dear! I don't like to see you so upset. You know we can't return to Lancashire. If we did, I'm quite sure our lives would be in danger.'

She nodded and tried to summon up a smile.

'Don't,' Cassandra said softly.

'Don't what?'

'Don't pretend with me. Isn't the homesickness getting any better at all?'

Pandora could only shake her head blindly and try to swallow the lump of grief that seemed permanently lodged in her throat. 'It was cruel of our aunt to force us to leave England. Why does she hate us so much?'

'Father always thought it was because *she* couldn't have children.'

'That's not our fault.'

Cassandra gave her a quick hug. 'I know.'

'You should have seen her that last time she came to visit us. She was terrifying, and strange too. She had that piece of your hair that they'd cut off, still tied with your ribbon, and we were certain if we didn't do as she asked and leave the country, she'd

have you killed. We thought we'd never see you again. It was a miracle you escaped to join us on the ship.'

A bell rang from inside the building. 'Breakfast is ready,' Cassandra said.

'I'll join you in a few minutes. I need to calm down.'

'All right.'

Pandora sighed as she looked round the garden, relishing a few moments on her own. The ship had been crowded with other single women brought out to the Swan River Colony as maids, some of them quarrelsome and noisy. All the Lancashire lasses had been thin at first after the long months without work because of the lack of raw cotton, but no one else seemed so badly affected by homesickness as she was. What was wrong with her?

She stared round. She'd thought she'd feel differently once they got here, but she didn't. It was so unlike the soft cool colours of her native Lancashire. Even at this early hour, the sun blazed down from a cloudless blue sky and she felt uncomfortably hot. Wiping her brow, she went to sit on a bench in the shade of a gum tree. It had pretty red flowers, but the leaves were sickle-shaped and leathery, of a dull green. Even the stray clumps of grass in the garden were more beige than green, burnt by the searing sun, while the ground was sandy, shifting beneath your feet as you walked. How anything grew in it, she couldn't think.

A pair of galahs flew across to perch in the tree, squawking harshly at one another. She'd called them 'parrots' when she first arrived but Matron had laughed and told her they were cockatoos, not parrots. Their calls were ugly, but they were pretty to look at, with pink throats and chests, pale grey wings, heads and crests.

One began to nip the flowers off the gum tree with its strong beak, not eating them but simply letting each one drop to the ground while it sought another blossom to

pinch out. Was it doing this for sheer devilment or was there some purpose?

Even if she wanted to take the risk, how could she return to Lancashire? She didn't have the money for the fare and she didn't want to leave her sisters. No, somehow she'd have to come to terms with this terrible longing for home. She stood up, took a deep breath and went inside.

As usual the twins were sitting with their heads close together, talking animatedly. Pandora got herself a plate of food and didn't comment on the way Cassandra was staring at her plate, eating very little. Her eldest sister had her own problems, was now carrying the child of the man who'd raped her just before she left England.

Afterwards Pandora helped with the clearing up, trying to speak cheerfully to the other women.

She *would* get over this homesickness, she told herself firmly—or learn to hide it better. She'd never been a whiner, wasn't going to start now.

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## ***Lancashire: 1st January, 1864***

Mr Featherworth leaned back in his chair and studied the young man sitting on the other side of his desk. Not good-looking, Zachary Carr, too tall and bony for that, but still, he had a reputation for honesty and common sense, and a steady gaze. The late Mr Blake had thought a lot of him, had said several times that you'd go a long way to find a more decent fellow. That was much more important to the lawyer than how a man looked.

The more he talked to the young man, the more he warmed to him. Carr had been the breadwinner for his mother and sister for several years, so was clearly a responsible person, and he seemed intelligent too. He might never have travelled overseas before, but he was young and strong, and at twenty-five, he'd grown beyond a young man's rashness. He even knew how to ride a horse, because his uncle had a farm. That was a big advantage, because Mr Featherworth had been told there were no railways in the Swan River Colony.

Most important of all, though: Zachary knew the four Blake sisters by sight.

Yes, Mr Featherworth was sure he'd chosen the right person to send on this mission.

'It's not taken as long as I expected to find a ship going to the Swan River Colony—or Western Australia as some call it now. I've booked you a passage on the *Clara*,

which is due to leave London on January the 11th.'

Zachary's face lit up, then the date sank in and he looked startled. 'But that's only just over a week away! How will I ever get ready in time?'

Mr Featherworth held up one hand. 'Please let me finish.'

The younger man gave him an embarrassed smile. 'Sorry. I'm a bit excited about it all.'

The lawyer smiled back at him. 'It's not surprising. Few young men of your station in life are given an opportunity to travel to the other side of the world. But as you know, the Blake sisters had already left England when their uncle's will was read, so someone has to tell them they're the new owners of his grocery emporium, and escort them back from Australia.'

Zachary nodded. 'It was a sad business, that. I thought a lot of Mr Blake. He was a good employer and a kind man.'

'Yes indeed.'

They were both silent for a few minutes. Who would have thought the late Mrs Blake would go insane, murder her husband and force her nieces to leave the country in fear of their lives? The idea of all that still gave the lawyer nightmares.

'Now, as to the details of your voyage, I had at first intended to send you steerage, because one has to be careful when spending a client's money. But this is a vessel taking convicts to Western Australia, not a normal passenger vessel, and I've decided you'll be far safer as a cabin passenger. Not that the steerage passengers mingle with the convicts, certainly not, but still . . . I was fortunate enough to secure the last vacant bunk for you—though you'll have to share the cabin with another gentleman.'

'What exactly does "cabin passenger" mean?'

'It means you'll be travelling with the gentry, away from the convicts and in more

comfort than the steerage passengers, both going out to Australia and when you bring the young women back. However, you'll not be in the first-class cabins, whose occupants eat at the Captain's table, but rather in the deck cabins, which have their own dining area and less generous accommodation. Your travelling companions will still be a better class of person than one would find in steerage, though.' He studied Zachary. 'You look worried.'

'I shan't know how to behave in such company. I've served the gentry in the store, but they live differently from us. I don't want to let you down—or embarrass myself.'

'I'm sure you'll do nothing to upset people, but if you're doubtful how to behave, watch others whom you respect and imitate them. You can also ask advice of the ship's doctor or one of the ship's officers, if need be. The main thing is not to pretend to know something you don't or be something you aren't. It'd not look good to be caught out in a lie.'

'Yes, sir. I'll try my best.'

'I'm sure you will or I'd not be sending you. Now, you'll need better clothing than you have at present—no, don't be embarrassed. In your present position, your clothing is perfectly suitable. But for this journey you'll need other garments if you're to gain people's respect and assistance, not to mention extra changes of clothing for the three-month journey. I've asked my tailor to make you some new clothes. He's prepared to work day and night to supply you with what you need. I shall myself escort you to London and we'll purchase anything else necessary from a ship's chandler near the docks.'

He paused and frowned, because this was a delicate matter, something his wife had pointed out. 'It might be a good idea for you to eat your evening meals at my house from now on, so that we can make sure your table manners are correct. There are

niceties of eating, ways of using various pieces of cutlery . . . well, you understand, I'm sure.'

Zachary flushed but nodded.

'You'd better stop work in the shop immediately. Go and inform Prebble. Tell him we'll find a replacement till you return. Then come back and my clerk will take you to see the tailor. You'll also need to go to Hawsworth's to purchase underclothing and whatever else you're in need of. The clothing will, of course, be yours to keep afterwards.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'We'll discuss the arrangements you'll need to make for the journey home to Lancashire after our evening meal tonight. How surprised those young women will be to hear about their inheritance! They'll be so happy to be able to come home again.'

'And if they ask for details of their legacy, what am I to tell them?'

Mr Featherworth hesitated.

'I'm not asking out of curiosity, sir, but they're bound to want to know.'

'Broadly speaking, they own the shop, the building in which it's located, including comfortable living accommodation above it, as you know, plus several cottages and houses which are rented out and bring in extra income. There is also a tidy sum of money in the bank. This was to have been used to provide for Mrs Blake during her lifetime, but was not needed in view of her death so soon after her husband's—though that was a mercy, given her state of mind.'

He raised one finger in a cautioning gesture. 'Mind, you are not to tell anyone else, *anyone at all*, these details.'

Zachary nodded. No need to say that. He wasn't one to tattle about other people's affairs, let alone betray confidential information.

Excitement swelled within him. He was going to Australia, travelling the world!  
What wonders would he see on his journey?

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Pandora walked back across the yard of the Migrants' Home to join the twins after speaking to a lady seeking a housemaid. It had been an effort to answer the questions. What did she care about finding a job when Cassandra was in such trouble? Before she left the ship, her sister had been accused of stealing money by her employers and was now confined to the Home. As if any of them would steal!

'The lady you were talking to looks very annoyed,' Maia said.

Pandora shrugged. 'I told her I couldn't take the job. She lives a long way from Perth, somewhere to the north. It takes five days to get there by cart. I don't care what Matron says, I'm not going that far away from you all.'

'I hadn't thought it'd be so hard to find work near one another.' Maia linked arms with her twin, Xanthe, and the three of them moved to a quiet corner.

But people pursued them there, all seeking maids.

'Why did you come to Australia if you don't want a job?' one demanded.

'I shall complain to Matron about your attitude,' another said huffily.

Pandora didn't try to respond to that. Bad enough to be so far away from her home. Unthinkable to be separated from her sisters as well.

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A little later that day a well-dressed couple came into the Migrants' Home with a man strolling behind them as if he was with them. With a shriek, Pandora ran across, so happy to see someone from home that she flung herself into his arms, laughing and crying at once. 'Reece! I can't believe it's you!'

He stared at her in blank astonishment. 'What the— Pandora, what on earth are



you doing here?' He looked round. 'Is Cassandra with you?'

'Yes, but it's a long story. Not for public telling and—' she began, stopping as she realised who he was with. 'Mrs Southerham! Oh, I can't believe our luck! You're just the person we need to see.'

Livia smiled at her and the twins, who had come across to join them. 'Isn't Cassandra with you?'

'They won't let her come outside. They think she stole some money. She says *you* gave it to her.'

'I did give her some.'

They all tried to talk at once, explaining what had happened.

Reece beamed at them. 'I can't believe it. Cassandra's here in Australia. I was going to send her a letter asking her to join me here.' To marry him.

Matron came over to see what was happening and speak to the Southerhams.

Reece listened for a moment or two, then asked who this Mrs Lawson was. Luckily Matron didn't catch what he said.

Pandora poked him in the ribs and whispered, 'We'll explain why later. But Mrs Lawson is Cassandra. She had to pretend she was married to get passage on the ship.'

He looked at her in puzzlement.

'Shh. Later.'

Matron finished talking to Mrs Southerham, who confirmed that she had indeed given Cassandra the money, then went to write a note to the Governor. She took Reece with her, because he was insisting on seeing Cassandra. 'You can speak to her at the other end of the garden. I'll send her out to you.'

Pandora waited anxiously. She found it hard to talk to Mrs Southerham about a job because she was hoping desperately that Reece would still love Cassandra and, in spite

of what had happened, still want to marry her.

When she saw him stride round the corner of the Home with an agonised expression on his face and walk out into the street without even stopping to explain, her heart sank. She said a hasty farewell to the Southerhams and hurried back to their quarters to find her sister.

Cassandra was weeping.

'Oh, love, what's the matter?'

'He walked away when I told him about the baby.'

Pandora had expected better of Reece, who had been a friend of the whole family back in Outham, who had courted Cassandra, but hadn't been able to marry her because he was out of work since the mills had stopped for lack of cotton from America. 'Then he's not worth loving. You were raped. It wasn't your fault.'

'How do you stop loving someone? I told myself it wouldn't be right to expect him to marry me, not now, but I hoped. I couldn't help hoping.'

It was a while before Cassandra calmed down and took up her sewing again, but Pandora hated to see the bleak unhappiness on her face.

Things seemed to be getting worse since their arrival in Australia, not better.

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Zachary walked slowly through the streets of Outham, his head spinning with information and excitement. As he entered Blake's Emporium, Harry Prebble, who made everyone all too aware that he was now the temporary manager, looked up with a sour expression on his face and gestured to him to come into the back.

'You've been away long enough, Carr.'

The two young men stared at one another, antagonism fairly humming between them. Harry might have been chosen to run the shop until the new owners could be

brought back to Lancashire, but Zachary knew he was still jealous of the other being sent to Australia to fetch them home. And he'd always been resentful of Zachary's extra inches. He was over six foot tall while Harry stood a bare five foot six.

The doorbell tinkled and Harry took a quick peep into the shop. 'There's Mrs Warrish. You'd better start serving now, Carr, and—'

'Mr Featherworth says I'm to stop work immediately because I sail next week and there's a lot to be done. He says you can take on other help while I'm gone. I'll get my things and leave you to it.'

'I need help now. I must say it's very selfish of you. Didn't you remind him it's Friday, our busiest day?'

'He and I were talking about the journey, not the shop.'

'It's all right for some!'

'*You* have nothing to complain about. You've been appointed temporary manager, haven't you?' Zachary bit back further hot words, annoyed at himself for giving his feelings away. He'd have loved to run the shop, and after working there since the age of twelve, he was sure he'd do it just as well as Harry. Better, because Harry always fussed about details and ordered the same old goods, never looking at what was happening in the world, how people were changing and wanting to buy different things.

Railways had changed everything in the past twenty years and it was now possible to get foodstuffs from all over the world as easily as they'd got them from Manchester in the old days. Mr Blake had often talked about this and Harry had listened with an intent expression on his face, but the implications never seemed to sink in.

'Well, don't forget that you'll be coming back to work under *me*.'

'*If* you get the appointment as permanent shop manager. That'll be up to the new

owners.'

'Who else could they appoint? I know everything about how this shop is run. Haven't I worked here since I was twelve?'

'We both have!' And Zachary had been there for a year longer, actually.

'Well, I'll be able to *prove* my worth to Mr Featherworth while you're gallivanting round the world, so the job's as good as mine. Those nieces of Mr Blake's are only mill girls, however intelligent they're supposed to be. They'll know nothing about running a shop, so they're bound to turn to me for advice. I'll make sure the profits rise while I'm in charge. That's what will matter to them.' He jutted his chin challengingly.

It wasn't worth arguing, so Zachary went into the rear of the shop and took down his apron from the hook on the wall, retrieving his lunch box. You couldn't afford to waste good food in troubled times like these. So many people in the cotton towns were going hungry for lack of work, thanks to the war in America stopping raw cotton getting through to the mills.

A year and a half ago, in 1862, Mr Blake had started providing food for his staff at midday and broken biscuits with their cups of tea at other breaks, knowing those still in employment were going short to help their hungry relatives and friends. But Harry had discontinued that practice as soon as he took over, not even providing cups of tea on the pretext that he didn't dare be extravagant with someone else's money. You'd think what he saved was going into his own pocket.

When he got back from Australia, if Harry was put in charge, Zachary intended to seek employment elsewhere, even if he had to move to another town to find it.

He left the shop and looked back at it thoughtfully. A huge plate glass window that had caused a sensation in the town twenty years previously when first installed, because it was so different from the small panes that all the other shops had. Tins and

boxes were displayed there in carefully arranged piles. The words BLAKE'S EMPORIUM stood out in foot-high golden letters on a maroon ground above the shop window.

It must be wonderful to own such a business.

He felt sad as he passed a group of men loitering on a street corner, their clothes ragged and their faces gaunt with the years of hunger. He'd be eating well at the Featherworths' that evening so on an impulse he shared the contents of his lunch box with them. Not much for each one, but something, and it broke his heart to see how carefully they divided the food, so that each would have the same amount.

Men like these were such a contrast to the more affluent customers who came into the shop. If only the war in America would end! People said the South was getting the worst of it now, but Zachary didn't care who won. He just wanted the Americans to start sending cotton again. Without it, the mills of Lancashire stood silent, no smoke pouring from their chimneys, or only a trickle when they fired up the steam engines to keep them working properly. The clear sky still looked strange to him, because on fine days he was used to seeing smoke trails criss-crossing it.

Even the relief schemes that had been set up in the town couldn't feed so many families adequately and that showed in people's faces.

Zachary realised he'd stopped moving and clicked his tongue in exasperation at himself. Why was he loitering around daydreaming when he had a thousand things to organise for his adventure?

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Although Reece came back to the Migrants' Home the following day to apologise to Cassandra for walking out on her, she steadfastly refused to marry him.

Pandora watched them both from the shade of the tree where she had again taken

refuge from the heat. They loved one another, she could tell. But although her sister had wept when Reece walked away from her, she said it only proved she was right to decide not to marry him. She didn't want the child to be treated badly. Strange how protective Cassandra was to her unborn baby.

Maybe if I met someone I loved, I'd be able to settle down here more easily, Pandora thought. But she knew with a sick certainty that she wouldn't. This place was . . . wrong for her. It wasn't *home*. She found the heat particularly trying and her face felt raw with sweat. Even the nights were hot, though occasionally an afternoon sea breeze that locals called the 'Fremantle Doctor' brought a little relief for an hour or two.

She was getting better at hiding her misery, though, and was rather proud of that.

At the moment her best hope was to find a job near enough to her sisters to see them regularly. Reece's employers, the Southerhams, had offered her a position as a maid of all work, and they were kind enough to say Cassandra could go too. But they couldn't afford to pay two maids, so her sister would get only her keep.

It was a fair offer, probably as good as they were likely to get, given the circumstances, but Cassandra refused to accept it because Reece also worked for them.

Well, Pandora wasn't leaving her sister on her own, not in that condition, not if she had to defy the Governor of the colony himself.

Later that day a man called Conn Largan turned up at the Migrants' Home, offering jobs to the twins, caring for his invalid mother. They lived an hour's drive away from the Southerhams, which was quite close, it seemed, in Australian terms.

In the end Pandora confronted Cassandra. 'Working for the Southerhams is the only way we can all four stay together. You *have* to accept the job, whether Reece

works there or not.'

And at last, because there truly was no other way to keep the family together, Cassandra gave in.

Pandora felt for her, they all did, but it was a relief to have their immediate future settled and to get away from the restrictions of the Migrants' Home.

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The week following the interview with Mr Featherworth passed in a blur of activity for Zachary. The tailor finished his new clothes with amazing speed, finer garments than he'd ever worn in his whole life.

He was also supplied with an incredible number of other clothes. There were a dozen beautiful shirts, some in lightweight materials like gauze cotton, because the weather was much hotter in Australia. Each one had three matching collars and there was a whole box of studs for attaching them to the shirts. There were also a dozen travelling shirts of flannel, a dozen cravats of various colours, several sets of braces, cotton drawers at half a crown a pair, under-vests at four shillings and sixpence each, and nightshirts at ten shillings each.

He was speechless at how much this must add up to and tried to protest to the clerk that he could manage with less.

'Mr Featherworth has taken advice from those who've travelled overseas and this is the minimum number of garments you'll need on such a long voyage, young man.' Mr Dawson patted his shoulder. 'There are those who take twice as many clothes with them.'

Zachary could only shake his head in wonderment. He didn't tell anyone, but he was delighted to be so well turned out, for once. It was a struggle for him and his family to stay decently dressed on his wages alone. Normally his sister Hallie would

have had a job too, at least until she got married, and her money would have been a big help in supporting their widowed mother. Because of the cotton famine, however, jobs were scarce and few families in Outham had more than one breadwinner.

But he remained concerned at how much this was costing the heirs. When Mr Dawson mentioned buying a trunk, Zachary felt comfortable enough with the lawyer's clerk to make a suggestion of his own. 'Why don't we check the attics above the shop and see if there are any trunks or other items of luggage? There are all sorts of bits and pieces stored there. I've seen them when I've carried things up for Mr Blake.'

'Very sensible idea, young man. We'll go there at once.'

Harry came out of the rear of the shop to see what they were doing when they entered the living quarters. 'Oh, it's you!'

He'd known perfectly well who they were, was just being nosey, Zachary thought, saying nothing.

'Carry on with your work, Prebble,' Mr Dawson said, in a sharp tone that said he didn't like Harry either. 'This is none of your business.'

When the clerk turned away, Harry glared at him, then saw Zachary looking and went back into the shop. But his expression had been so inimical that Zachary couldn't help worrying. Harry had rather a reputation for getting his own back on those who had upset him. He'd not be able to do much to a man like Mr Dawson, though, surely?

The attics were very dark and there was no gas lighting up here, so Zachary ran down to ask the maid for a lamp. 'How are things going, Dot?'

She smiled at him. 'It's been really peaceful. I'm so glad Mr Featherworth has let me stay on. There. This is a good bright lamp.'

'I'll see to lighting it.'



She lingered to chat. 'Mrs Rainey's cousin is coming to live here soon. Miss Blair's been ill but she's a lot better now. She's been to visit and seems a really nice lady. I'll feel better to have some company.' She lowered her voice and glanced over her shoulder. 'Apart from *him*.'

'Harry?'

She nodded. 'He keeps coming in, saying he has to check that I'm doing my work properly. And he sits up in the sitting room sometimes after work. No one told me I'd have to answer to *him*.'

Amazed by what she'd told him, Zachary took the lamp up to the attic and with its help they soon found what they were seeking. 'There!' He pushed some boxes aside. 'A trunk. It's a little battered but I don't mind that.' He opened and shut it, finding all the hinges and locks in good working order. 'I shall be happy to use this one and save some money.'

The clerk nodded his approval and went back to searching, finding a large portmanteau of scuffed leather under an old rug.

Zachary hesitated, wondering whether to interfere, then decided the poor little maid needed protection. 'Dot was saying that Harry keeps coming in to check up on what she's doing, and . . . he sits in the owner's quarters after work sometimes.'

The clerk looked at him in surprise. 'What happens with the maid or in the living quarters is no concern of his, none whatsoever. I'll mention it to Mr Featherworth. No one need know you told me. You and Prebble will have to work together after you get back, so we don't want to stir up bad blood between you. The Methodist Minister's cousin is to move into the flat soon, partly because I don't trust Prebble. He's taken a few liberties since Mr Featherworth made him manager. Miss Blair will make sure everything is looked after properly and will do a complete inventory of the contents

for us. It's asking for trouble to leave a place with so many valuable things in it empty, especially in hard times like these.'

Harry came out again to watch sourly as Zachary and the shop lad carried the trunk and portmanteau down the stairs and out to a handcart.

'Have you no work to get on with, young man?' Mr Dawson asked sharply. 'This is the second time I've seen you neglecting your duties today.'

'I thought you might need some help.'

'Well, we don't.'

Scowling, Harry went back into the shop.

'Sitting in the flat, indeed!' the clerk muttered as they walked back down the street. 'Well, that's going to stop.'

Zachary had wondered why they felt the need for someone to occupy the flat. Mr Featherworth was a kindly man, but his clerk seemed more astute. Zachary didn't think they'd have any worries about the financial side of things, though. Harry Prebble had never been anything but honest and industrious during the years they'd worked together.

But Zachary still didn't like him, he admitted to himself—hadn't when they were boys, and trusted him even less as a man. He'd never understood why.

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The next day Zachary's mother was advised on how to pack his new possessions for a long journey by no less a person than Mrs Featherworth. Two extra sets of clothing and underclothing you needed, because it was not only hard to wash clothes in sea water, to do it for so many people was impossible. Trunks were brought up from the hold each month so that people could change their garments during the voyage, which would last approximately a hundred days. Just imagine that! What a great distance

he'd be travelling.

Every evening he went to dinner at the lawyer's house, the first time so nervous he doubted he'd be able to eat a mouthful. But his hostess was a motherly woman, whom he'd sometimes served in the shop, and it was impossible to stay afraid of anyone with such a warm smile.

'You won't mind if I help you improve your table manners, Zachary dear?' she said gently, taking his arm as she led him into the dining room, with Mr Featherworth and his two daughters following.

'I'd appreciate any help you can give me, Mrs Featherworth.' He tried not to stare round but was awed that they had a big room like this purely for eating in.

As everyone took their places, she pointed to the cutlery in front of her and said in a low voice, 'The trick is to start from the outside pieces at each side of your plate.'

While Mr Featherworth said grace, Zachary stared down at the daunting array of cutlery. So many pieces for one meal alone. How much were they going to eat?

The minute grace ended, a maid carried in a soup tureen which she set in front of her mistress. Mrs Featherworth ladled its contents into bowls and the maid passed them round, then left. Everyone seemed to be waiting to eat and no one started until the mistress did.

Zachary took up the big round spoon on the right when the other did and watched how they used it before starting on his own soup, a brown meaty concoction served with crusty rolls.

The food was delicious and for once he had more than enough to eat. He only wished he could take some of his share home for his mother and sister to try.

After the four courses were over, they went to sit in the drawing room. Mrs Featherworth patted the sofa next to her and Zachary sat down, already trusting her.

‘There are other things my daughters and I can teach you, for instance, what subjects to discuss with ladies, how to offer your arm.’

The two young women sitting nearby nodded their heads and smiled at him. Nice lasses, they seemed, about the same age as his sister. He wished Hallie had a fine dress like those they were wearing, because she was just as pretty.

‘Do you enjoy reading?’ Mrs Featherworth asked.

‘I love it. When I have time, that is.’

‘Good. We’ve found some books for you to read on the journey to help pass the time. I do hope you’ll enjoy them.’

The elder daughter got up and from behind her chair produced a pile of about a dozen books fastened together by a leather strap that even had a carrying handle on the top.

He stared at them in delight: *A Tale of Two Cities* by Dickens, *Westward Ho* by Kingsley, a book of poetry. He’d had little time for reading in his busy life, because the shop stayed open until late. ‘Thank you so much.’

‘We got you a diary too,’ the younger daughter said. ‘Mama thought you’d want to remember your big adventure. You can write down what happens every day. I wish *I* were going to Australia. It sounds *so* exciting.’

Mr Featherworth said little, but let his womenfolk do most of the talking, sitting watching them with a fond smile.

The older daughter carried a fancy wooden box across from a side table and set it on the sofa between Zachary and his hostess.

‘This is an old travelling writing desk, which used to belong to my uncle,’ Mrs Featherworth said. ‘It was lying around in the attic, not being used, so we thought you might like it. We’ve furnished it with letter paper and envelopes, plenty of nibs, and

ink powder so that you can make up more ink as you need it.'

He opened the lid and the box became a writing slope, the interior covered in dark red leather with a pattern embossed in gold round the edges. There were compartments at the front for pens, ink and sand bottles, though of course people used blotting paper these days not sand to dry the ink. 'Thank you. I'll take great care of it for you.'

'Please keep it afterwards as a memento of your adventure.'

He swallowed hard and tried not to betray that this extra unnecessary generosity had moved him almost to tears. From being a man struggling to dress decently as well as provide for his mother and sister, he was suddenly being loaded with possessions. He would, he vowed mentally, not let the lawyer down whatever happened.

His hostess patted his hand in a motherly gesture. 'If you have anything else to occupy yourself with, be sure to take it with you. The journey will go on for many weeks.'

*Drawing materials, he thought. I used to love drawing as a lad. I can afford some plain paper and pencils, surely? And a rubber, too.* He smiled at the memory of an elderly uncle, also fond of drawing, who'd always called rubbers 'lead eaters'.

Zachary walked home carrying the books and the writing desk, his mind humming with all the information. He was amazed at how pleasantly the evening had passed, considering how nervous he'd been. But the lawyer's daughters were nice lasses, for all their fine clothes, and you couldn't find a kinder lady than Mrs Featherworth, so he'd soon lost his fear of upsetting them.

It was cold and rainy and he couldn't help shivering after being in such a well-heated house. It was hard to believe that he was going to a country where in summer the weather was hotter than it ever became in Lancashire, and where it never snowed

in winter. It was hard even to imagine how that would feel.

When he got back, he found his mother and sister waiting up for him, eager to hear how the evening had gone.

Hallie pounced on the books while his mother marvelled at the travelling writing desk, running her fingers over the gleaming wood and examining each bottle and compartment.

‘Oh, you’re so lucky!’ Hallie sighed. ‘What wouldn’t I give to have all those books to read! I’ve read everything I want to from the public library.’

‘Choose one and read it while I’m away. It’ll remind you of me.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, of course.’ He gave her a hug, surprised at how tall his little sister had grown lately.

She picked out *Mary Barton*, her fingers caressing the tooled leather binding of the novel. ‘I’ll take this one, then. Thank you so much, Zachary.’

He smiled indulgently. ‘I know how you love your stories of romance and adventure.’

‘It’s nice to dream sometimes.’ She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. ‘I’ll dream for you now. Perhaps you’ll fall in love while you’re away, meet a wonderful girl on the ship or . . . No, better still, fall in love with one of the Blake sisters and then the shop will be partly yours. That’ll solve all our problems.’

He didn’t like this and drew back from her. ‘Don’t be silly! Mr Featherworth is trusting me to bring them back safely, not to prey on them.’

‘Falling in love isn’t preying, Zachary.’

‘It would be in this case.’

She flounced one shoulder at him. ‘Oh, you! Sometimes you’re too noble for words!’

And once you get an idea fixed in your mind, there's no changing it. Why can you not dream and let things happen as they will?'

Because he'd never been free to dream, he thought bitterly, biting back an angry response. He'd had the responsibility for supporting them from a very early age. Not that he minded, of course he didn't. And though they disagreed sometimes, as brothers and sisters always do, he loved Hallie dearly and didn't want to quarrel with her just before he left.

'Now, calm down, you two,' his mother said, giving her daughter a quick kiss, then her son. She lingered next to Zachary to beg, 'Don't let all this go to your head, son. It's a great adventure, to be sure, but you'll still have to come back and work at Blake's.'

'If Harry Prebble stays in charge, I'll be looking for work elsewhere.' He wished he hadn't told her that when he saw the anxiety in her face. 'Don't worry. I shan't do anything rashly.'

'No. You never do. I wish you did sometimes. We've stopped you being a young man, haven't we?' She began to light their candles ready to go up to bed, shaking her head sadly. 'As for Harry, you two didn't get on at school, were always fighting one another till you grew so much bigger than him, and it doesn't seem to have got much better. It's not good to make enemies, Zachary love.'

'Sometimes enemies make themselves, Mum, whether we want it or not.'

'Well, see that *you* don't behave ungenerously, whatever *he* does. A man should do nothing he's not proud of, whether he's poor or rich. And the same when you're out in the world. Always make me proud of you, son.'

'I will.' He went to check that the front and back doors were locked, extinguished the paraffin lamp in the kitchen and made his way up to bed by the wavering light of

his candle.

Zachary knew that whatever he said or did, Harry Prebble would always be suspicious of his motives and would continue to act in a mean-spirited way if left in charge. You had to stand up to a bully, or he'd get worse. Zachary had learned that lesson as a lad and it held true for grown men, too. But sometimes it was an unfair world and bullies had more power than you, so you couldn't challenge them, could only walk away.

No, he'd definitely look for other work. And surely, if he performed this task well, Mr Featherworth would give him a good reference?