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For Tommy

Much of the Australian portion of this book takes place on the country of the Eora nation. Mary Bryant and her family would have interacted with members of the Wangal people (including Bennelong or Bannelon), the Gadigal, the Gamaragal or Cammeraigal, the Kayimai and others. They may also have had contact with the Awabakal and the people of the Torres Strait Islands, among other groups. We, Meg Keneally and Echo Publishing, acknowledge the Traditional Owners of country on which this story unfolds, and those throughout Australia. We recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

*Somewhere in the Tasman Sea, off New South Wales,
April 1791*

She never slept deeply, not here. Even if she had, this wave would have woken her, elongating up to the sky and then bending its force down onto their small boat.

She gripped the children before her eyes were fully open. She lived now with the humming fear of one of the ropes she had used to tie them breaking, of waking to find a child gone, of realising they had probably already travelled halfway through the blackness to the sea floor.

They were both there. If Emanuel was making any sound, she couldn't hear it, not above the wind. She couldn't hear Charlotte either, but the little girl's mouth was open, and stretched by terror. She was probably crying, but it was impossible to tell as the constant spray claimed all tears.

Her husband gripped the tiller in the fading light, sitting in water that stopped only a few inches from the gunwales. He was grinding his teeth, trying to keep the boat pointed into the waves, probably worrying that the sun would betray him by setting, and that the boat would suddenly find itself side-on to a salt monster.

Jenny had been dreaming of Penmor. Its stillness; its muted, deadening light. Of her family's narrow, crammed house. Now, though, its door was splintered, its remnants hanging open on

one of the hinges as though somebody had enjoyed pulling it out of its frame and destroying it.

She had called, or tried to, but it was a whisper. She inhaled, tried again, but no matter how much breath she added to it, the sound would not increase. In any case, there was no answer.

But someone was there. Her father was lying in front of the fire where they had put him after the wreck, still pale and swollen from the sea. Her mother sat in the same chair as always. Had she moved? Had she spent, in that chair, the years which had propelled her daughter over impossible seas to an implausible country?

Her mother started to speak, but her cheeks cracked from the side of her mouth to her ears, and instead of speech she ejected a blast of wind that sent Jenny back down the hill, into the dream sea, from which she surfaced into consciousness and the chaos of the waves.

It must've gathered quickly, this storm. There had been some chop when she'd gone to sleep in the late afternoon, and since then the winds had been pummelling the water into a new substance altogether, a landscape of moving mountains where no boat had any business existing.

And it wouldn't, not for long, not if they didn't start bailing. Carney was at the sail, trying to get it down before the wind punched a hole in it. But Harrigan was no use. He had retained enough consciousness to lift himself from the bottom of the boat when the wave hit, sitting up so that he looked like a duchess in a bath. But he still had that stare, still looked as though he was viewing a different world from the rest of them, one far more horrific.

Bruton, meanwhile, just sat there, hanging on to his bench, his eyes flicking from Jenny to her children. No doubt he was resenting them, useless passengers who contributed nothing to his survival. She rolled her lips together. Why in God's name did she always have to harangue the men? Why couldn't they

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see what needed doing and just do it? She kicked at the privy bucket, its edges sticking up from the water inside the boat. 'Bail, for God's sake! We'll founder, and soon! You have to bail!'

Bruton kept staring. Not the type to take orders from a woman who'd tied herself to a bench.

The boat was slowly grinding up a wave, which disappeared underneath them, sending them crashing down. The impact dislodged some of the water, but then added more, and when Jenny wiped her eyes she saw Bruton, stubborn but not stupid, frantically bailing with the privy bucket.

Somewhere beyond these waves was a place where their choices extended beyond drowning or starvation; where she wouldn't have to clench her arms around the children and tell the sea it couldn't have them. But they hadn't reached it yet. Sometimes, when the sea was at its worst, she wondered if they ever would.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

Southern Cornwall, 1783

The sea had killed him, they said. Jenny did not blame the sea. Jenny blamed the King: the man who had taxed salt and windows and wigs to pay for a war in a place where people had decided they'd had enough of taxes, and who had kept on taxing them once the war was over.

So there was nothing left when the pilchards stopped coming, when the shards of silver that had swarmed around the boat every other summer vanished. Their disappearance had forced her father onto the night-time sea. It was hungrier than its daylight counterpart. It had consumed others in their village, sometimes vomiting them up onto the shore, sometimes simply removing them from the world of earth and sunlight.

Her mother was fussing, that morning. Dolly, serving at a tin-bought manor always knew how to calm her. Jenny seemed only able to make her more anxious. Constance licked her fingers to remove an imaginary smudge from Jenny's face, although there were plenty of real smudges to be dealt with. Adjusting her shawl, sweeping non-existent dust out the door. Going to the window, where the extinguished stub of a tallow candle stood.

Will Trelawney had never been out all night. Constance would have heard the wind, as Jenny had, attempting to tear away the shutters and push open the door. Anyone on the ocean

during that moonless night would have needed to be a lifelong mariner to survive.

Will was a lifelong mariner, with a thin, etched face that hinted at more than his forty summers. His father had taken him on the ocean before he could walk properly, Will once told Jenny, and he'd begun fishing when his age was still a single digit.

Perhaps Constance was rolling the thought of Will's competence over in her mind, looking for flaws. Jenny certainly was. She had sometimes seen sailors asleep in their small boats, too tired or drunk to head home. Perhaps her father was beginning to stretch, cursing the morning cold and the scolding he would get when he walked through the door.

When he did come through the door, though, it was clear he'd been floating in the sea for some time. His skin was white with a tinge of purple, particularly around his mouth, as though he'd tried to colour his lips with crushed flowers as girls sometimes did.

There was a gash on his forehead, and Jenny wondered if he'd been killed by a deliberate blow rather than by hitting his head as the ocean tipped him from his boat, the victim of a deal gone wrong. For smugglers, events could take a dangerous turn in the darkness of a Cornish cove. Harold Tippett and his son Stephen, men who had shared the ocean with Will, laid his body in front of the fire, with Harold cradling his head so it didn't flop back and hit the floor. Jenny wasn't sure what the point of the gesture was, but she was strangely glad of it.

Her mother sat, after Harold and his son left, her eyes flicking between Will and the fire.

'Ma,' Jenny said a few times. 'Ma, he can't stay here.'

'This is his home,' Constance said, and said no more.

Jenny knelt and kissed her father's forehead, felt the lack of intention behind it, saw nothing reflected in the half-lidded eyes. She felt the approach of abandoned grief, muted for the moment. It couldn't fully exist as long as Jenny told herself that this piece of flotsam which had taken her mother's voice was not her father.

The grief would come as soon as she admitted that the water-logged hands which lay on his chest had hauled nets with hers, had shown her how to tie ropes. She was not ready, yet, to concede that fact. There was no space for it next to her rising anger. She wanted to pound at the thing by the fire, ask it why it had taken her father's mind out to sea and hadn't carried it home. She wanted to take an axe to the boat, to burn it. She wanted to punish anyone who had profited from the penury that had sent her father to the night-time sea.



A small boy had once lived at the Trelawney house on the hill above Penmor Harbour, a narrow building like its neighbours, mean-windowed and crammed between other buildings which were distinguished only by their occupants. They were confronted in their cramped condition by the vastness of the ocean, and by the bravery of the little boats that punched through the estuary waves to reach it.

The boy in the Trelawney house, Nathaniel, had shared quarters with his parents while Jenny and Dolly gossiped and occasionally fought in the darkness of the next room.

Nathaniel stopped living there around three months after his birth, when a vicious winter drew his soul out of his body, leaving a meaningless amalgamation of flesh in the cot.

It was, perhaps, Jenny's fault. She did wonder. She'd been doing the work of a boy, even an infant who would not be up to it for some years. Perhaps he had slipped away because he felt he wasn't needed.

Jenny and her father were often driven onto the November sea by the revenue men, who sat like great toads, their mouths open, ready to gulp down whatever came in their direction.

After one blustery day, Jenny dumped out the contents of her creel for her mother's inspection.

'They're not as big as they were, are they?' Constance had

said, turning each pilchard over, smelling it, running her fingers over the scales.

‘Checking if one of them is a revenue man in disguise?’ asked Will, coming in with an armful of firewood.

‘Perhaps,’ said Constance. ‘How about this one?’ She flung a fish across the wooden table on which the catch was laid out.

The pilchard struck Will in the chest, and he caught it before it fell to the ground. He tossed it back on the pile. ‘Late in the season,’ he said. ‘Perhaps that’s why.’

‘You can tell these fish, then, that it’s their fault your daughters wear old dresses.’

‘Everyone does anyway,’ said Dolly, guiding Jenny to the stool by the fire. ‘I know it’s fun to blame Pa – I enjoy faulting him for just about anything.’ She smiled at her father, who winked. ‘But mother, really, Jenny and I don’t need new dresses.’

Dolly started trying, as gently as she could, to undo a knot that the wind had tied in Jenny’s hair. A soft girl, Dolly, with well-behaved honey hair that refused to allow the wind to tangle it and concentrated instead on framing her delicate face to best effect.

Jenny shared Dolly’s impish chin, her upturned nose and grey eyes, but her brown-red mop insisted on mimicking seaweed as often as possible. The matted, salt-crusted thicket was resisting even her patient sister’s best attempts. Jenny was glad it was taking a while; she didn’t want to move from the stool by the fire, even as it baked the salt into her clothes and hair.

‘Jenny’s dress wouldn’t last, anyway,’ said Constance. She and Will had named their daughter Jane, but no one had used the name since her christening. It seemed, somehow, too small for the wild girl to inhabit. A Jane would sit obediently by the fire, stitching and peeling. A Jenny might do anything.

Constance walked over to the fire and lifted the snarl at the back of Jenny’s head. ‘How hard do you have to try to get it like this?’ she asked, kissing her daughter’s forehead.

‘The wind does all the work,’ Jenny said.

‘Hm. Will, do you truly need her on the boat?’

He nodded. ‘Half the deckhands have been press-ganged, and the rest are in the mines. She is good at it, too.’

Jenny knew she was. A girl of torn skirts and wet feet, a creature of the sea as her sister was a product of the hearth.

It was the hearth her father sat down in front of each night to remove his salt-soaked boots, while her mother wrinkled her nose and declared she preferred the smell of Nathaniel’s worst emissions to that of her husband’s feet.

One night, when her mother padded towards the back of the cottage, she did not return with the baby boy, ready to settle at the fire and give up her milk. Constance’s moan started softly. Jenny thought it was the wind, until the sound rose to a shriek as her mother carried the small, still bundle to the hearth.

It alarmed Jenny, later, that she could not remember Nathaniel’s face. The thought that her parents might not be able to either alarmed her even more – it seemed cruel to her that he should exist, that his smiles should be answered and his cries attended to, and then vanish and become faceless thanks to the poor memories of those sworn to love him.

But she always remembered his absence, which swelled to occupy far more space than his presence ever had. It pushed her mother to the window, there to stand for half an hour, an hour, more. Putting all of her effort into staring; she must’ve done, for clearly she had no energy left to power her ears, which didn’t seem to admit the entreaties of her daughters.

Before Nathaniel died, Jenny would often go out on the boat with her father. He would sit in the bow and tell her it was her job to watch the clouds, to let him know if any of them might become dragons, so he could bring the boat in.

For a time, the absence of his son pushed her father out alone, onto the estuary and past the two squat towers that guarded its entrance into the sea. He would even take his small boat out after a good catch, when he didn’t need to, whenever he could find a

deckhand to help with the ropes in and the nets and sometimes even when he couldn't.

But with one son dead and no prospect of another being born, and many of the village's young men killed fighting against the freedom they didn't understand, Will again brought his daughter out with him. This time, though, her responsibility extended beyond keeping an eye out for dragon clouds. This time, she needed to know how to mend a net on a heaving sea, how to reef a sail against a storm, how to set a net and haul it so that more fish ended up back in the boat than they did in the ocean. It helped that Jenny felt no fear at the sight of a saltwater hill bearing down on the boat, and that she didn't scream when they were caught side-on by a wave that threatened to return them to the sea.

Whenever wind began plucking at the ocean, she enjoyed standing or crouching in the bow. Her father would yell at her to sit down, but she could feel the ocean through her feet better than she could through her backside. She could know it.



When the village men came to take Jenny's father and put him in the earth, her mother seemed not to notice. Her eyes stayed fixed on the place where he had lain, and she made no attempt to draw her shawl around her when Dolly, given special leave from the scullery, placed it on her shoulders.

Constance stayed like that after nightfall, well after the house had been set to rights and the laundry done and delivered to those expecting it.

Then Jenny sat on the floor and hugged Constance's calves as though trying to prevent her from fleeing to the place where Will had gone. She rested her head on her mother's lap and wept silently into the rough folds of her skirt, allowing her mind to blur until she became insensible of her mother's hand creeping from her side and slowly stroking her hair.

CHAPTER 2

‘It’s ready, then?’ Constance asked. ‘We can sell it?’

There was no need for a boat in the Trelawney household, now. At least, not as far as anyone apart from Jenny was concerned. So she had decided to repair it before selling it, had spent the past few weeks making it right. A few timbers had been staved in by rocks where the sea had pushed the boat ashore, and some of the seams needed attention. It was easy work for a girl who’d held a pot of pitch while watching her father make winter repairs.

‘Try not to let anyone see you,’ her mother would say. A girl with a reputation for doing men’s work might have difficulty finding a husband, particularly when that girl was already known as something of an odd one.

Jenny took her time, telling herself and her mother it was because she wanted to do the job right, get as good a price as possible. But she knew, as did her mother, that she was using the time to say goodbye.

Then the boat was fixed. Then the boat was sold. It brought in enough money to push away immediate penury, and Dolly took a position as a cook in one of the grand houses of a family who made gold from tin. But even with the wages she sent home, they would soon be in trouble again.

There was no work to be had, at least not in Penmor. Jenny

was known everywhere as an unpredictable girl with an unladylike mouth.

Her mother didn't scold her for being such an unsuitable prospect. A dressing down would have required an interest in the outcome, and Constance seemed to believe that she no longer had a stake in anything, including her own survival. She continued taking in laundry but didn't give it the care she once had, so it was often returned late and in a poor state. Before long, she had only her own washing and a few items brought in by customers who wanted to show support, who believed her malaise was temporary.

Jenny had no such belief. Not on the days when she went out to pry limpets from the rocks and returned to find the fire unfed and her mother sitting, shivering and immobile, in the fading light.

'I'll go into Plymouth, shall I?' Jenny said to her one night, mainly to throw a stone in the silent pool between them. 'Might have better luck there, when it comes to work.'

'No one will know you there,' said Constance, keeping her eyes on the section of floor where Will had briefly lain on his journey from the ocean to the cemetery.

'That is probably all to the good, Ma.'



By lunchtime the next day, Jenny was further from Penmor than she'd ever been on land, although not nearly as far as her father had sometimes taken her out on the boat. She was not concerned about being robbed by highwaymen, who were said to be common in these woods; it would be plain to anyone hiding in the closely packed, crackle-branched trees that they weren't likely to get much of a bounty from this girl in her rough skirts, which might once have been blue were perhaps not quite heavy enough for the cold, and would soak up half-frozen puddles of water should she trip.

Still, when she heard hoofbeats and felt their vibration becoming stronger, she forced herself into an echoing trot, eyes on the road where forest creatures had excavated holes, perhaps for the pure delight of seeing travellers trip. As Jenny looked a bit too far ahead, she didn't notice a particularly narrow rut at her feet until it had snatched her toes out from under her.

The horse pulled up beside her. It was a sturdy animal, not the kind a lord would ride but better than most she'd seen. The rider – perhaps not richly dressed, but warmly so, in the kind of well-made clothes merchants favoured – dismounted and walked over to her. He didn't reach out to help her up. He put his hands on his hips and stood there, bent over and staring, as though trying to decide how best to use the grimy girl that providence had thrown into his path.

He is appraising me like he'd appraise a coat or a hog, she thought. He is deciding whether I have any value, and I will not get any say in it. She tried to stop her body from tensing, from betraying her intention to jump and swing and run.

But now the undergrowth was shifting and crunching, leaves being disturbed. When the merchant saw her glance over his shoulder, he half turned towards the sound. Another man, taller and broader, in shirtsleeves that would offer no protection from the oncoming winter, had stepped into the road behind the merchant. The second man, his features concealed by a broad-brimmed black hat, had grabbed the reins of the horse between one of Jenny's breaths and the next.

He smiled at the merchant, inclining his head slightly. 'I prefer not to stave anyone's head in, particularly this early in the day,' he said, and Jenny noticed a club in his belt coated with dark stains, likely the result of past stavings.

His mark clearly knew this dance. He swore and spat on the ground, narrowly missing Jenny. Then he started forward and reached into his jacket, drawing out a short, pitted blade.

Jenny doubted he could overwhelm the thief, not with a

knife that would have trouble cutting an apple in half. But she hadn't liked the way he'd been examining her before they were interrupted. So she reached out, took his ankle, and pulled.

The man was not quite quick enough to put his hands out as he fell, winding himself so that he lay face down, head to the side, gulping lungfuls of highway dirt.

The thief moved smoothly towards them both, fluidly drawing the club out of his belt. In a few seconds, he had one foot planted on either side of his victim. When the merchant rolled over, he found the club inches from his nose. The thief said nothing, and didn't have to. His victim inched backwards, trying to get far enough from between the man's legs to sit, stand and run.

'Your jacket,' the thief said.

The smaller man, still wriggling backwards, allowed his momentum to draw his arms out of the jacket. His shirt, which had been hidden, was covered in brownish and yellowish stains. He left the jacket on the ground and stood, the tip of the club tracking his nose.

The thief bent to pick up the jacket, running his arm through the loop of the horse's reins as he did so. 'Thank you,' he said, and the smaller man turned and ran in the direction he'd come from.

The thief didn't seem to notice Jenny. He walked to the saddlebags and drew out a purse, hanging the jacket over the pommel and mounting the horse in a smooth, practised arc.

Jenny got to her feet, thinking to step to the side of the road among the bushes, but the thief turned in the saddle and threw something in her direction. She flinched, and he laughed and inclined his head to where the object lay on the road. It was a silver coin.

'For your assistance,' the man said.

She bent over, keeping her eyes on him so that she couldn't see exactly where the coin was, having to scabble in the dirt with her fingers to find it.

He laughed, almost indulgently. 'I don't intend to hurt you

– you’ve nothing to steal, and if you have any charms that might interest me, they’re far too well hidden under those dreadful clothes.’ He urged the horse on, coaxing it to walk a few paces before suddenly pulling back on the reins. ‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘would you like more of that?’

Jenny didn’t answer. She had no idea what he would expect in exchange.

‘If you would,’ he said, handsomely for you to fall in the road again, the next time a horse is approaching,’ he said. Far easier to stop them that way than by jumping out and trying to grab the reins. Had my foot trampled once, would rather not have it happen twice.’

Jenny stared at this creature who discussed theft so casually, as though it was a legitimate enterprise, as though he was musing on how to make a farm more productive.

He was clearly tired, though, of waiting for a response. ‘I’m at the Plymstock Inn most nights,’ he said. ‘Don’t suppose you know it, but most will when you get to Plymouth. I’ll pay you well, as I already have.’ He turned, kicked the horse’s flanks and rode on.

Jenny turned too, in the other direction, clutching her coin hard enough to leaving an imprint on her palm. She began to run, heedless of the ruts in the road, back to Penmor. She was anxious to be near houses and people, and away from stands of trees that might hold men far less polite than the one she’d encountered. Anxious, too, to bring home the silver trophy, to see if it was valuable enough to buy a smile from her mother.