Fled

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ZAFFRE

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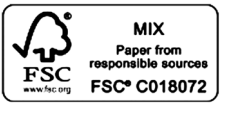

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For Tommy

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

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 taxed salt and windows and wigs to pay for a war in a place where people had decided they'd had enough of taxes.

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 the big house on the hill now, 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 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 the nets and sometimes even when he couldn't.

But with one son dead and no prospect of another being

born, and a great many of the village's young men off 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 a highwayman, 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 and were perhaps not quite heavy enough for the advancing cold of autumn.

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, grabbed 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 scrabble 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.

'I would pay 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 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.

CHAPTER 3

She had seen enough highway robbers slowly losing their flesh at the Four Turnings to know the risks.

The noose, though, was not what prevented Jenny from going to the Plymstock and taking the thief up on his offer. He could hardly, she thought, be worse than the state-sanctioned thieves in government offices and on estates around the country. But he would be no better, and she had no intention of exchanging one type of servitude for another.

If she could operate in freedom, according to her own wishes, and at the same time dent those who enclosed lands or grew bloated on the proceeds of rotten boroughs … the idea, really, was alluring. And the threat of the noose was no more disturbing than the threat of drowning when at sea – a possibility that was always there, and easier to ignore because of it.

Despite her excitement Jenny had decided, on the way home, not to show the coin to Constance. To return with such a prize might rouse her mother to ask questions. Jenny, more than most, was vulnerable to whispers. She told Constance she'd found work in an inn between Penmor and Polkerris, close enough for her to come home each day. Nothing fancy, without uniforms like Dolly wore, unfortunately. Washing, scrubbing floors. Not the kind of work to give rise to questions when she came home. Intimately acquainted with washing and scrubbing

floors, Constance didn't need to have those tasks described to her by her daughter.

There was no urgency – the silver coin would last some time after she had made a few purchases in other villages, to break it down into coins of the type that wouldn't raise suspicion. She listened to the highway's heartbeat, watched the ebb and flow, determined who was likely to be travelling at what time of day, and whether anyone else was likely to be watching from the side of the road. But sometimes she found it hard to convince herself that she wasn't about to take a step that could not be untaken, one on a road which could lead to her murder at the King's hands.

Jenny had never liked approaching the forest from the Penmor side. The Four Turnings had to be traversed to gain the trees, hardy specimens that had resisted the axes used to clear their cousins to make way for fields and mines all around.

The crossroads was where they displayed the bodies.

Occasionally someone from Penmor would find themselves at the end of a rope after being convicted of theft, poaching, smuggling, or any other act designed to transfer resources from the powerful to the powerless. They weren't hanged in Penmor, of course; the village was too small to boast a gallows. Usually the job was done in Plymouth or Portsmouth or Exeter. But that didn't mean the village which had spawned such sin should be spared the sight of what the King's justice left behind. So every now and then, the justices at the assizes would suspend a strangled son or daughter of Penmor at the Four Turnings, to rot while serving as an example should anyone else be thinking of transgression.

Many travellers crossed themselves or made less sanctified signs when they passed a carcass dangling there. Jenny would force herself to stare at the bodies, despite the inevitable creeping fear. She felt she owed them that much, that an averted gaze would be an insult; she imagined shadows climbing to the ground and dogging her steps.

But the dead weren't always there. Perhaps it was their absence that led Jenny to do what she did on the last day of June.

She risked a trip into Polkerris, buying some cheese and bread. She would just, she told herself, walk in a little way, so she could eat in the shade and the peace. The woods, surely, would not take that as a promise, a sign of commitment. She found a flat rock a little off the road, and sat and ate. She stayed there for hours, taking pleasure in surrounding herself with an element that belonged to no one – despite what the lords thought – and would not submit to the excise men.

There were others here, she could tell. She knew by the rustles, by the regular footfalls betrayed by leaves, and an occasional distant exhalation. They did not molest her, and she came to trust that they wouldn't. Perhaps they felt she was one of them.

She was, though, so intent on listening for footfalls from the forest that she nearly missed the ones coming from the road.

It was a man, she saw as she crept towards the edge of the trees. A young man, thin and with an unlined face. He had a decent coat on: well made, a nice thick wool, with a handkerchief in the breast pocket. She knew such garments easily sank into the river of clothing sold second-hand. This was the best kind – good quality, but not distinctive. No one could point to it and say, with absolute certainty, yes, that's mine, everyone has seen me wearing it.

He was young and thin, true, but still likely stronger than her. However, she needed more money, and a coat, after all, was hardly a purse.

She customarily carried a small knife in a leather pouch hidden in the folds of her skirts. It was far too blunt to be of any real use, and festooned with rust spots, but she fancied she could brandish it more threateningly than that merchant had wielded his.

It came out of her pocket now. She looked at the spotted blade and asked herself whether she would really use it to threaten a spotted youth.

Before she could consciously answer the question, she found herself stepping into the road.

The young fellow stared, probably trying to make sense of the fact that a girl around his age was suddenly here, in the middle of the forest. As he did, Jenny realised she had no idea what to do next. She did nothing, then, but stare back: a frank gaze most boys hadn't seen from most girls, at least not the kind their mothers would want them associating with.

This boy's eyebrows stayed clenched in a frown, but a tentative smile emerged. Jenny took a few steps towards him, and he didn't move. He seemed to be wondering if an offer was being made, not suspecting a threat was coming instead. She quickly pounded out the few remaining steps that separated them, raised the knife and rested its rusted tip just beneath the lad's ridiculously prominent Adam's apple.

'I'll be taking that coat from you, my lover,' she said, mimicking the greeting she heard older women give to returning sailors and market stall customers, an intimate word rendered meaningless by its liberal use.

His smile disappeared, and she saw his fist beginning to clench. A nice boy, probably, but it could only be moments before he realised that he was the stronger of the two, and that the knife resting at his throat was impossibly blunt.

She pressed it hard enough to hurt, hoping this would confuse his perception of its sharpness.

'Now I wouldn't want to be ruining the day by drawing blood,' she said. 'You simply need to take off that lovely coat – gently now, where you stand – and leave it on the ground, and away you go. Else I might have to call my brother out.'

Oddly, this invocation of a long-dead boy made her feel far worse than stealing a coat at knifepoint. The young man didn't

know that Jenny's brother had never walked. His eyes raked the trees, looking for a hulking enforcer who could come crashing out.

'It's all right, Nathaniel,' Jenny said loudly, and already the lick of guilt was diminishing. 'This one looks like he'll be reasonable, so you can stow the club.'

The lad did as he was told, then, shrugging the coat off and letting it fall.

'Thank you,' said Jenny, still smiling. 'Can I ask, where are you from and where are you going?'

'Home to Polkerris,' the boy said. 'Where I have brothers of my own I can bring back.'

She would sell the coat in Menabilly, then.

'Best get about it,' she said, lowering the knife. 'Off you run, before Nathaniel joins us.'

The boy did.

She had made him do it, she realised. She had scared him so badly that he was probably still panting his way through the woods. He'd probably decided to turn Jenny into a strong man in the retelling of the story. She was not, among these trees, weak or poor. She was not a strange girl to be mocked but a shadow to be feared.

Jenny picked up the coat. Well made, as she had thought. Nothing in the pockets, unfortunately, except the handkerchief. But it should fetch enough, for now. A garment like that, it wouldn't last long in the marketplace, and Jenny wondered if she would have the opportunity to steal it again from its new owner.

✦

Often a week, even a fortnight would go by before a suitable candidate came down the road. Jenny had very specific criteria. They needed to be young, or small, or in some other way vulnerable. They needed to look as though they could afford to

part with their coat or their bonnets or their purse – she had no intention of sending an impoverished girl or a starving boy further towards the grave.

Then, suddenly, they'd be walking past. Usually boys only just grown to manhood, their muscles not yet having fulfilled their promise. More rarely a woman, forced by circumstance to tread the road alone, no doubt fearing an encounter with someone like Jenny. There were more of them, now winter was beginning to fade and the increased ration of daylight emboldened travellers to risk the forest road.

So Jenny would smile a nasty smile, and call forth her dead brother, and take enough to make sure that Constance had more than limpets to eat.

Until the day Jenny felt a hand on her shoulder and heard a rasping voice. 'How discourteous. I invited you in the front door, but you've chosen to sneak around the back.'

CHAPTER 4

The highwayman was wearing the coat she'd seen him take. But he wasn't wearing the broad-brimmed black hat that had shaded his features, and she could see bare patches of scalp showing through uneven hair, black threaded with grey.

He smiled, then, and the odour of his ruined teeth assaulted her before he had a chance to. 'What am I to make of this? Such an insult, to have my offer rejected in such a way. I thought, so I did, that I was dealing with a woman of principle. She'd rather starve in honest labour, I thought, than eat well dishonestly, and good luck to her. I can admire someone like that. But this – this is simply wrong.'

A small thought emerged through Jenny's sudden, brutal fear. *This is someone who sets store by courtesy. Someone who would be expecting an apology.*

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't mean to wrong you. It came upon me, sudden, a boy who was all but begging for it, and when I saw the food I could get for my mother, I kept doing it. I meant no offence.'

The man laughed. 'You didn't mean it, and you are only doing it to feed your mother. Are the prisons not full of people who have said exactly that? Do the tongues which spoke those words now lie still in the mouths of those who dangle at the crossroads?

No, the law does not accept that as an excuse, and neither do I. Amends will have to be made.'

'But how am I …?'

'You will continue as you have been – picking up the easy targets, getting what you can. You will bring me your catch, and I will tell you where best to dispose of it. You will bring me everything you earn for, say, a half a year. You can keep enough for food. After that you can keep half.'

'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have, I know. I'll stop, yes? I'll stop picking off the easier travellers, leave them to you. I'll find other work, and you'll not see me again.'

'That is not how I do business,' the man said, stern suddenly, speaking like a disappointed reverend. 'You have started on this path now, and you cannot leave it. Should you try – should you decide to wait, say, more than a week between catches, I may find myself arriving at the Trelawney house, talking to your mother. You are not the only footpad in these woods, Jenny. Some of them are from Penmor, and recognise an unusual girl like you.'

'You're no better than an excise man,' she said, and then gasped at her own words. Goading someone like this might be fatal.

He laughed, though. 'Yes, I am. I'm only taking some of your earnings – I'm not asking the baker for some of his too, so he has to charge you more. It is the best bargain you will get, Jenny. Especially when the alternative is, well … I know where to hide things.'

'Where are you hiding your name?' she said. 'How am I to find you? I fancy you wouldn't like it if I came into the Plymstock asking for Mr Thief.'

'No, I wouldn't. Confusing, too, as there are many who would answer to it. I have not gone by the name I was born with for some years. You may call me Mr Black. Best not to use that name to anyone else, though. When you come to the Plymstock with your takings, you'll see me easily enough, or I'll see you. Please,

do not let more than seven days go by before you find your way there.'

Jenny had enough left – just enough – to replicate the wages she would have earned at an inn. She told her mother, as the days lengthened, that she might have to start staying overnight at the inn. Would Constance be all right? Constance nodded – she required little in terms of company, conversation, now.

Her mother did reanimate, a little, when Dolly came home for a visit. Constance seemed to enjoy hearing about her elder daughter's work, the pretensions of the house and its owners, and the clothes of the women who lived there and who visited; they wore more money on their backs than Constance would see in a lifetime.

Afterwards, Dolly and Jenny went down to the water and sobbed into each other's shoulders. Dolly shed quiet, restrained tears. Jenny snorted and gulped.

'You mustn't let people see you like this, you know,' Dolly said. 'Bad for your reputation.'

'Mother would be delighted with that,' said Jenny. 'Anything to prove I'm not a boy.'

'Is she still … well, *there*?' asked Dolly. 'Every time I visit she seems to have faded a little. Unless I caught her in a particularly glum mood.'

'No, no, you haven't. She's more there for you than she usually is. She does what is required to keep herself alive, and I worry that she'll decide even that is too much of an effort.'

'The laundry looked in good order, though.'

'I do it, Dolly,' Jenny said. 'She would lose the business, otherwise. And I won't have all the neighbours gossiping about how Constance Trelawney is a ghost who never raises a hand anymore.'

Dolly nodded, then wordlessly hugged her sister.

'But Doll … there might be a problem. I might need to spend more time at the inn. Don't know whether I'll be able to keep it all up.'

'Jenny, you know I can't come back more often. I'd love to …'

'I know, I know. I'm not asking you to. But could you talk to her? I'll go outside, so she won't feel she has both of us to contend with. Maybe she'll listen to it, coming from you. Realise there are things she needs to do if she wants to keep living.'

'I'll try, of course,' said Dolly. 'Although there are times when it's unwise to push through to a choice between living and dying. Which inn is it, by the way?'

'Oh, a small one between here and Polkerris. Not easily seen from the road.'

'Why on earth would anyone build an inn where it's not easily seen?'

Jenny shrugged. 'It is known, this place. To those who know such things. I wouldn't be surprised if the owners pay some of their well-connected customers to talk up the place.'

After Dolly spoke to Constance, she shook off enough of her despondency to pay more attention to the laundry. But she still gave no sign that she might fret at Jenny's absences. Whenever Jenny said goodbye, Constance simply nodded, her eyes fixed on the dying fire, making no move to replenish the wood. Jenny wondered if her mother would simply sit there until she died, if she had no one to raise her from her chair and make sure she ate.

Jenny's money was dwindling; she needed to get out from under Mr Black long before a half year was up. She'd started to spend nights away from Penmor, but not on straw on the floor of a pub – she found hollows, ledges, small caves where she could

shelter. The one part of her haul she kept back from Mr Black, when she went to see him in Plymouth, was a flint she could use to kindle fires. She took care to keep them small enough to avoid attracting attention; she was reasonably sure she wasn't the only person who spent nights in the woods.

She would get up with the sun to rob early morning travellers, occasionally coming upon other forest-dwelling bandits, snoring and drooling into the dirt, while on her way to take up her roadside vigil. She would always station herself as far as she could towards the start of the road so she could pick off travellers before anyone else got to them.

But she was still nowhere near paying back Mr Black.

He came and found her, every now and then. He'd be waiting when she woke up, stiff and cold and with dirt rubbed into the creases of her face. He was too large for the leather jacket he had stolen, ramming his thick arms into its sleeves, but he seemed quite attached to it, even as the seams began to complain and come apart.

Whenever Jenny had money, she gave it to him. More often than not, these transactions took place at the Plymstock, where he was well known.

'That your ponce?' the innkeeper asked her once, seeing her look around and fixate on Mr Black.

'My ponce?'

The keeper laughed. 'Never mind, you've answered my question.'

She wasn't the only thief Mr Black was running, far from it. She'd seen them come into the inn: men and women, mostly young but with the occasional respectable-looking matron. They would walk in and blink away the sunlight, turning their heads in the vain hope that no one would notice, stopping when their eyes came on Mr Black.

But he still liked paying the forest visits. He told Jenny that it kept people honest, made sure nothing was being held back.

'I can't get enough money,' she said to him one morning. 'I won't be able to pay you three pounds before my family's money runs out, and I'm no good to you dead of hunger.'

He looked at her thoughtfully. 'A better road is what's needed,' he said. 'A better road and a sharper knife, and some company. Oh, and some breeches.'

Jenny had still been spending the occasional night at home. She would wash when she could find the water after rain, getting rid of the smell of the forest and the pervasive dirt that hid beneath its fallen leaves.

Her mother seemed to be improving. The coughing sickness that visited Penmor most years had taken Mary Tippett with it, and Constance had been spending some time with Howard, helping to console him and seeing to his domestic duties.

Jenny told her mother that she'd found another position, with better money but further away. She would visit when she could, but it might not be for weeks. Constance nodded, embraced her daughter and told her to be good. She didn't weep as she'd done when Dolly's departure had created a hole in their now permanently ruined family.

A better road, Mr Black had told Jenny. It was a fair distance from Penmor, the road that delivered passengers from the ferry into Plymouth.

'You mentioned company,' she said to him.

'I did,' he said. 'I also mentioned breeches.' He handed them to her, the type a farm boy might wear, slightly too big. 'Easier to leg it in these, should the need arise. Cover your head, too – no need for anyone to know you're a girl, at least from a distance.'

He led her out to the Plymstock Inn's stables. As they approached, Jenny noticed two stablehands. One was standing and pacing, while the other sat on a stump and idly whittled with

a knife nearly as blunt as hers. The lad looked up. The skin was clear of stubble but pitted by a childhood bout of the pox. The hair, unevenly hacked – quite likely with that blunt knife – fell to the shoulders. The eyes were round and brown.

This was a woman, Jenny realised. Her loose shirt hid her breasts, but she sat with her knees together, not spread wide the way a stableboy would. Keeping her legs together was probably the only injunction from her mother that this woman still followed.

Jenny turned her attention to the other stableboy, seeing that this was also no boy. Shorter than Jenny by a hand and a half at the least, the second woman had smooth skin and matted hair tied back in one of its own tendrils.

Mr Black addressed himself to the woman on the stump. 'It was help you wanted, Elenor, and here is help … It *is* Elenor this week?'

'Elenor will do,' said the woman. 'And she will be no help to me in skirts.'

'That can easily be changed, and will be.' To Jenny, he said, 'Go in there and get those breeches on.'

'It's a stable,' she said. 'There's a horse in it.'

'He won't mind.'

'If she's scared of horses,' Elenor said, 'what will we do when a cart comes by?'

'You can stop whining and all. Haven't I got what you keep asking for?'

'If it's two of the same, they'll be turning me off and showing me at the crossroads before the week's out.'

Jenny listened through the stable wall as she shed her skirts next to a whickering dray. *Two of the same*. The other girl must not be to Elenor's liking any more than Jenny.

She came out, holding her skirts in a bundle. 'I have no fear of horses,' she said. 'I have fear of starving, and of lippy women.'

Elenor smiled, and her breath whistled through a missing

front tooth. The contraction of her mouth produced an effect more sinister by far than Jenny's well-practised mean smile, and Jenny was reasonably sure this was Elenor's intent.

The other girl smiled too, welcoming and hopeful and perhaps slightly nervous.

'This is Beatrice,' said Mr Black to Jenny.

'Bea, if you like,' she said.

'Bea's only done a few,' Mr Black told Elenor. 'You have to be patient.'

'I'll need the patience of the Blessed Virgin herself,' said Elenor. 'You know she tripped, last time? Just lay there. The cart drove around, but the driver could easily have stopped, tried to arrest us both. If there'd been more than one of him, I think he would have.'

'Harder to apprehend three than two,' Mr Black said, 'and this one, I can tell you, generally only trips when she needs to.' He gave Elenor a bundle wrapped in oilcloth. 'Dinner,' he said. 'Off with you now, all of you.'

'Are we not staying here?' asked Jenny.

Elenor's vulpine grin appeared again. Mr Black ignored the question and stalked back into the inn, the transaction complete.

'Slept in the woods before?' Elenor asked Jenny.

'Yes. Lots.'

'Better than this one,' Elenor said, inclining her head towards Bea. She handed the bundle to Jenny and started walking out of the yard. 'Quick as you can, come on now. Harder to find the place in the dark.'

The place, after an hour's walk, turned out to be a small clearing in the forest, with the remains of a fire at its centre, ringed by trees and small piles of human shit.

Elenor handed out the bread Mr Black had given her, tearing it into three parts in a way that seemed very inexact and ended with her getting the largest chunk. This was something, Jenny thought, which would need to be addressed. But not tonight.

'What's your village?' she asked Bea.

'We've no village, none of us,' Elenor said, before Bea could do more than open her mouth to answer. 'We are of the forest. We are no one.'